

## Lost Seeds of Moonlight in our Veins

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# Lost Seeds of Moonlight in our Veins

by [PrettyLittlePoutyMouth](#)

## Summary

Carly's first friend at college turns out to be Tori, which complicates Sam's need to maintain distance with her former best friend. Cat's idealistic views about love just make everything more difficult. Jade doesn't know why everyone can't get it together. Love is lunacy.

## Notes

Like Part 2, this is finished and will have a similar posting schedule.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

## Waves; Autumn

The summer between high school and college passes at once slowly, bright, beautiful days full of friendship and laughter, and all too quickly, a blaze of hazy memories overlapping and merging into a meld of mirth. Between the group's babysitting gigs, auditions, and internships are the parties and get-togethers that characterize the celebratory spirit of a goodbye to one era of life and the anticipation of embarking onto the next.

It sounds kind of cheesy, but it's true. Even Sam gets swept up in it. College hadn't really been on her radar; she figures it had been enough of a miracle to pass high school. But as Cat enrolls in her community college classes, selecting a less expensive route to acquiring some credits and exploring her options before choosing which program she wants to ultimately pursue, Sam realizes that Cat has the freedom to just...pick whichever classes she wants, as long as they're open and she isn't limited by prerequisites.

"Wait, you can just take any class you want?" Sam asks.

Cat shrugs. "Sort of. I'm taking a couple of common general education courses that will transfer and then I'm taking some theater and music classes because that's what I like."

"So I could just, like. Take a bunch of art classes if I wanted to," Sam muses.

Cat's eyes widen. "Sam! You could come to college with me!"

Sam has been kind of wondering what she's going to do while Cat is off at school. Babysitting is still something that works best as a team job for them, and Sam certainly doesn't want to get another "real" job, whatever that means. They make things work with their babysitting pay. And even if doing art on someone else's terms for a grade doesn't sound ideal, Sam also knows herself well enough to know structure helps her stay motivated, and honestly, spending the day drawing or painting while Cat does whatever she does at school doesn't sound that bad. Especially if she doesn't really care *that* much about the grade.

So Sam immediately starts the process of enrolling in community college so she can sign up for as many art classes as are still open to put herself on campus around the same time as Cat every day. And since they both barely report any income, the grant from the state makes their classes very cheap. They only need to pay for books and art supplies.

But before college, there's still the whole summer, yawning out before them, gleaming with both excitement and bittersweetness.

Almost every day, there's some kind of adventure with their friends, depending on who is available. Andre always knows where to see live music in the city. Robbie invites them to comedy shows. Tori and Jade are always happy to come spend the day in Venice watching movies or making movies, since Jade is never without a camera. And Beck's trailer is the site of a lot of parties.

Beck throws parties to celebrate getting an audition, going to an audition, getting a callback, going to a callback, Robbie “being adorable,” it being a Tuesday...there really doesn’t need to be a specific reason, just an excuse to gather, smoke some weed, and maybe drink some beer if someone can get their hands on it.

Cat always says she doesn’t care much for either substance, but she does occasionally indulge. Sam notices she gets either extremely quiet or extremely giggly when she has weed (never more than a puff or two), and usually just gets very cuddly when she drinks (never more than one beer).

For all of Sam’s delinquency, this is the first time she’s encountered stuff like this. Her mom had dated plenty of losers with addiction issues (not that addiction made someone a loser, but dating Sam’s mom certainly did), so a lot of it lost its appeal just from seeing people like that, and Carly being her straight-laced best friend and Freddie being the biggest nerd just made all of it not something that was very enticing to her friend group in Seattle. Even her “friends” from juvie were usually more talk than action when it came to anything like this. But theater kids, apparently, are more apt to experiment. Go figure.

Sam finds that weed either makes her feel like she could paint the Sistine Chapel in an evening or makes her feel like she might crawl out of her skin. And alcohol just makes her feel silly and slow. But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t indulge in either or both, because sometimes, feeling energized or ridiculous feels exactly right in the moment.

The parties involve more than just substances, of course. There are the deep conversations as everyone’s consciousness tries to pierce the mysteries of the universe, especially enhanced or impeded by whatever is consumed that night. There’s the karaoke, the silly sketches, Sam drawing everyone’s portraits, Rex freestyling, and Andre and Tori creating new songs on the spot. It’s fun, it’s creative, and it all makes Sam feel so alive.

They tend to rotate who is the designated driver, and often, Sam and Cat stay over at Tori’s because she lives closer to Beck, and because her parents, even her cop father, turn a blind eye to their teenage shenanigans as long as they stay safe. Sometimes they end up staying the night on the floor of Beck’s trailer. Which is why Sam definitely prefers ending up at Tori’s.

The first full moon of the summer falls just before Cat’s eighteenth birthday. They’re going to be throwing her birthday party at their apartment. It seems like the obvious choice for a party zone, considering they’re two teenage girls living alone, but for a few reasons, they don’t often really party there. First, they’re all the way across town, and traffic can make it a bit of a trip when you’re not on a motorcycle that can better navigate traffic snarls. Additionally, Nona’s name is still on the lease, so they know she’s technically responsible for the place, and could drop in at any moment. So could Dice. And neither of them want neighbors to talk about anything going on at their apartment that might impact people’s ability to trust them enough to leave their children in their care. It’s all about maintaining the appearance of responsibility.

Which, really, they are pretty responsible. That’s why they party at Beck’s trailer, or at Tori’s house, where alcohol is definitely a no-go, but where weed is okay, as long as someone has a medical card and everyone partaking is over eighteen. And, after Robbie’s birthday had passed in May, only Cat is still under eighteen. And that’s about to change in a few days.

Meeting Tori in Shadow Creek Park is a welcome respite from party planning and the anticipation of Cat's birthday. A hangout at Beck's is one thing, but hosting a birthday party is another, and since it's her girlfriend's birthday, Sam is taking on a lot of the responsibility. Which mostly means making sure everyone knows when to show up and making sure they have enough food, and making sure everyone knows that if they bring weed, they need to be discreet, because Dice and Goomer will be in attendance for some of the evening, as two of Cat's good friends. It's not that much, really, but it's work, and that's always a struggle for her.

So when Sam sighs as she tosses her t-shirt onto the ground of the clearing of the copse in Shadow Creek Park as if the garment itself had been a huge burden, Tori definitely notices.

"Sounds like you need this wolf night," Tori observes, sounding amused.

"Yes," Sam groans. She shakes her head, "I've never really thrown a party for someone else like this," she admits. "Carly threw me a party once," she remembers. "And it was both really special and also kind of a lot to be the center of something like that. But I never really threw her one like that. At least not the same way." Hosting spontaneous Crazy Hat Parties in Carly's apartment isn't nearly the same thing. "Spencer always handled her birthday," she finishes thoughtfully.

Tori smiles at her sympathetically. "There's really no way to get this wrong," she advises. "Cat loves you."

"Yeah, but...this is also the first birthday of hers we've been together. Or, hell, even *known* each other. So I have no idea what her standards are," she laughs humorlessly.

Tori looks thoughtful. "You know, I don't even really remember what we did for Cat's last two birthdays. I think she must've just celebrated with her family. I'll ask Jade, maybe we can help you out."

"Sure," Sam says, relieved.

"And then," Tori continues, "maybe you can help me with Jade's birthday next month."

Sam narrows her eyes. "Are you only offering to help me so I'll help you?"

"No," Tori says guilelessly. "Not *only*," she concedes.

Sam has to laugh. She's grateful for Tori's friendship, grateful for the ritual of their monthly trips to Shadow Creek Park. Being a werewolf with a friend is just better than being a werewolf alone.

She and Tori have a great night, as usual, and it seems that Cat and Jade enjoy their own guaranteed monthly hangout. Sam knows from Cat that she really values this time with Jade. They've been friends since middle school and have both been through a lot, both together and apart. Sam is glad that her own need to spend some quality time with another werewolf every month has led to Cat and Jade spending time bonding, too, because Sam knows that without

the prompting of the full moon, it might be difficult for any of them to decide to spend an entire evening with a friend instead of their girlfriend.

Because while Tori and Jade have been together for over a year now, Sam and Cat have really only been together for a few months, and have only been having sex for about one. They're still firmly in the honeymoon stage of their relationship. And from Sam's observations, Tori and Jade still seem to be riding high in that blissful state as well, considering they're rarely apart, especially without school obligations necessitating space from each other.

And a few days later, Cat's birthday is a joyful celebration. Cat is emotional at the attention of her friends; Jade confides in Sam that Cat's birthday sometimes had gotten overlooked because it's in the summer, something she, as another summer baby, is very familiar with. She explains that it was easier to forget when they were younger because they all had a little less independence, but that even last year she doesn't remember why they hadn't done anything. This is the first big birthday party for Cat that Jade is aware of, and Sam thinks it shows, from her sheer delight at every part of it—the decorations, the food, the company, and the presents. Especially the presents. Sam knows how much Cat loves presents, and makes sure everyone brings one for her.

And the celebration of Cat continues that night, in private, once everyone else has gone home, when Sam goes down on Cat for the first time. It's not new for Sam, but it's new for Cat, and the sounds she makes and the way she moves and the sheer force of her pleasure makes Sam feel very, *very* good about this particular way she'd made Cat's birthday special.

"I can't believe how good that feels," Cat marvels as Sam holds her in the aftermath of her orgasm.

"Feels pretty great to do for you, too," Sam chuckles, kissing Cat's forehead as they snuggle.

"What about you?" Cat asks in her flirtatious lilt, her fingers slowly beginning to walk themselves down Sam's stomach.

Oddly enough, Sam feels completely content having just given that experience to Cat. It *is* supposed to be Cat's day, after all. "I'm good," she assures her, "I don't need anything."

"But do you *want* anything?" Cat cajoles playfully. She lifts herself up enough to look at Sam, beautiful face relaxed and smiling, but her eyes, bright and dark like syrupy caramel, gaze at Sam with a look she knows *very* well by now. "Because I *really* want to make you come, too."

Heat flares through Sam's stomach and she nods, slowly. "You make a convincing argument," she states, attempting to keep her voice casual.

Cat's smile widens, then falters slightly. "I'm not ready to do what you just did," she admits. "I hope that's okay."

Sam kisses her soothingly. "Of course it is," she reassures. "I never want us to do anything you aren't ready for." She gets it. So much of sex is so new for Cat, and oral sex is about as intimate as things get, at least, Sam thinks so. She hadn't expected reciprocation at all, part of

why she'd framed things as just for Cat for her birthday, so as not to put any kind of pressure on her.

But, hey, if Cat wants to reciprocate in *other* ways, Sam is very open to that. And Cat's fingers, and kisses on her neck, and the sound of her quiet, whimpering moans as she touches Sam brings Sam to her reciprocated state very quickly.

June becomes July, the heat of the city grows, but though Sam expects a southern California summer to be unbearable, it's not all that different from Seattle, just less humid, and sometimes the evenings partying in Beck's yard get cool enough to need a sweatshirt. Some days it's hard to remember they have responsibilities, like babysitting or that they're supposed to be going to college in a few short months, as they all spend any free time and spare cash finding new ways to enjoy their time together as a group of friends.

July's full moon is just before Jade's birthday, but this time, both Sam and Tori are more ready for it. The success of Cat's party has made them confident, and they already have a plan, they already know what they're going to do. Tori's parents will be out of town in Santa Barbara, and Tori evidently has a plan to get Trina out of the house—something about an open mic night attended by talent scouts that absolutely isn't happening. So there's no anxiety as they prepare to change together in the clearing that night, only joy and anticipation for a night together as their animals selves, fully present in the power and sensation of being a wolf, and delighting in it.

Jade's birthday party is where Sam gets the highest she's ever been, because she already knows she's staying on Tori's couch that night, and Cat has her requisite two puffs and becomes giggly and...cuddly. And something about her is so alluring that Sam has trouble keeping her hands off of her.

They end up down in the Vegas' garage, Cat pinning Sam to the wall while they make out, legs entangled, until Sam has an orgasm a lot like that one in the janitor's closet the first week they'd started having sex. The waves of pleasure course through her, more intense than she expected, and only Cat's mouth on hers keeps her moans from being heard over the music playing in the living room above.

"Whoa," Sam breathes when it's over, barely standing on weak legs, Cat grinning proudly as she helps to keep her pressed against the wall and therefore upright.

"I'd hoped that would work," Cat replies mischievously.

"Yeah, it worked," Sam chuckles, and then it quickly turns to full laughter, and Cat joins in, and they're both laughing, stoned and post-coital and tucked away together at a good friend's birthday party, feeling safe and relaxed and utterly in love with each other.

"You think they've noticed we're gone?" Cat finally asks when their giggles die down.

"Probably," Sam replies. "Do we care? Or do you want me to get you off before we go back upstairs?"

Cat almost squeaks with eagerness, kissing Sam eagerly, and Sam proceeds to do just that.

When they finally do make it upstairs, it's clear that everyone knows what they were just doing, but at this point, things like this have happened enough times at Beck's parties that no one really says anything.

Except Jade, of course, who demands that to make up for their absence, they have to perform a karaoke duet.

Cat chooses "A Whole New World," which would not be Sam's first choice. Or any choice. But she's too stoned to do anything but have fun with it, and Cat sounds great, so there's no reason to be anything but happy about all of it.

August is hotter, and with it comes the realization that summer will be over soon. They all seem to be attempting to pack as much fun into the last month of freedom before their lives are about to change forever. As much as everyone is looking forward to college (at least, those who are going to college; Beck is hoping to launch right into an acting career and Robbie is taking a gap year to work on his comedy, though he is adamant that he wants to get a degree someday), there's the distinct sense of the possibility of loss, as they forge new connections and new friendships in new environments.

But they all keep promising each other that they won't lose touch, that they'll still hang out. It seems possible, at least, since they're all staying local, for now. Jade is going to film school at USC, Tori and Andre are both going to UCLA. But it's also true that college and careers are going to take up a lot of everyone's time, and they simply won't all be able to see one another as often as they have been. A trip across town that can take an hour if there's traffic just isn't worth it when you only have a few free hours rather than an entire day open. And no one is really anticipating having a lot of full, free days for a while once school begins.

But just as Sam is beginning to worry about missing all of her new friends, she hears from an old friend.

Freddie Benson calls her in the middle of the month.

He'd texted her several times that summer, indicating that he wanted to chat sometime, and Sam kept blowing him off (nicely, but still). It wasn't really for any reason except that she was usually doing other things (like Cat...or actual nonsexy things with friends), but there is also a bit of the sense that she's moved on from Freddie. Not in any sort of romantic way. That had never been a big part of their history to her. But more in the way that Carly is definitively a part of her past, Freddie is a connection to Carly, and the two of them had been bound by their mutual love for her (even if Freddie had never known that). It's a little hard to want to revisit her connection with someone when the very thing that had once connected them is still painful to think about.

But when he calls, Sam finally decides to answer.

"Yeah?" she answers.

"Sam?" he asks.

"Who else would it be?"



“I don’t know. Cat called me from your phone before. Maybe she answers your phone, too.”

“If she had, don’t you think she would sound a *lot* different?” Sam asks, though her mild annoyance with Freddie doesn’t prevent the affection in her voice as she talks about Cat from shining through.

“Good point,” Freddie concedes. “So, what’s up?” he asks.

“Uh, not much,” Sam replies. Even if she wanted to catch Freddie up on her life right now, where would she even start? They haven’t spoken in months. They never did have dinner together after he got out of the hospital for the tuna fish incident. So, really, an argument in Sam’s apartment that was more about Cat than him is their last interaction in which Freddie’s mouth wasn’t bandaged shut. He doesn’t know she’s dating Cat. Maybe he hasn’t even picked up on the fact that Sam is gay, as funny as that seems. He doesn’t know about her friends, he doesn’t know about her plans to take art classes at college. He knows where she lives and maybe that she babysits kids for a living. That’s it.

And he’s never known she’s a werewolf. And never will.

When the silence stretches for a moment, Sam prompts, “You didn’t call me just to ask me that, did you?”

“No, I guess not,” Freddie answers. “Look, Sam...I miss you. And Carly. This last year of high school was honestly...well, it kind of sucked. I mean, I did well and everything,” he amends quickly, then his voice turns sober again. “But it felt really empty without the two of you.”

Sam feels guilty, even though she’s also aware it’s not a reaction that makes a lot of sense. She has nothing to feel guilty about, and she knows that. Leaving Seattle was the right choice for her, the best choice, because it eventually led her to Cat. But she has to admit she never really considered Freddie’s feelings in all of that. His two best friends left on the same night, leaving him behind to live with his overbearing mother, without the escape of *iCarly* to take up his evenings and give him an excuse to get out of his apartment.

Freddie seems to echo some of these thoughts as he continues. “Don’t get me wrong, Gibby’s a good guy. And Spencer’s apartment has always been open to me even with Carly gone.” (Sam can’t help but wonder if Spencer is still taking wolfsbane every night so that he can be there for Freddie, who obviously needs an escape, now that he doesn’t have to watch after Carly). “But those two guys aren’t the two of you. I miss doing the show, of course, but mostly, I just missed getting to hang out with you two.”

“I miss you, too, Fredward,” Sam admits, defaulting to his given name because she’s surprised at how genuine she sounds, and isn’t about to let the conversation get too serious. She *does* miss Freddie, both as a friend and constant, reassuring presence, and as a proxy for missing Carly, for missing *iCarly*, for missing what her life used to be before Carly left it.

“Don’t call me that,” Freddie groans. But his voice turns affectionate, “But I’ve got to admit, I even miss when you do things like that.”

“What, say your utterly ridiculous name?” Sam teases.

“Make me smile,” Freddie confesses.

“Gross,” Sam comments dismissively.

“I know,” Freddie’s voice turns more serious. “But I didn’t just call you to tell you I miss you. I also called with some news.”

“What kind of news?” Sam asks.

“Good news, I hope. I got into Stanford.”

“Congratulations?” Sam ventures. She’s not really sure what to make of this news.

“Thanks,” Freddie replies, his tone a touch dry. “But don’t you see what this means?”

“Not really.”

“I’ll be in California, too! Okay, it’s northern California, and I know it’s a big state, but I’ll be closer to you than I was in Seattle. Like, within driving distance. And with Carly at UCLA, I thought maybe all three of us could get together sometime! Maybe even pick up where we left off with *iCarly*. Not weekly, of course. But maybe we could release something new. *iCarly* for a college audience.”

He sounds eager, excited. It’s a tone Sam knows well. Freddie is always full of ideas, innovations. But honestly, Sam is barely thinking about Freddie anymore. She’s thinking about Carly, and the news that Carly is, in fact, coming to college in Los Angeles.

Sam had meant it when she’d said that Carly could do whatever she wanted, she should come to school in Los Angeles if that’s what she wanted to do. Sam would never try to stand in the way of or sabotage Carly’s dreams. Though, truthfully, a part of Sam really thought that *she* would be the main reason Carly would want to come to school in LA, and without her, Carly would likely choose to go somewhere else. But, if Carly did anyway, Sam assumed that she would never have any reason to find out about it. That they would exist in the same huge, sprawling city and the chances that their paths would cross would be minimal.

But she hadn’t considered Freddie. Freddie, who misses them both, who sweetly suggests they all spend time together sometime, without the slightest clue that he’s suggesting something that makes the pit of Sam’s stomach clench and churn anxiously. Sam doesn’t know how to even *see* Carly at this point in her life. She doesn’t know if she ever will.

There’s no reason to go into all of this with Freddie. Sam knows, better than most people her age, how hard it actually is to take a road trip, and the drive Freddie is suggesting, while doable, is definitely a whole endeavor. She figures there’s little chance of him even attempting something like this until his fall break, and then it would have to coincide with Sam’s and Carly’s, and this would require him having no reason to go back to Seattle instead. She figures there’s a strong chance that he’ll befriend a bunch of nerds at his nerd school and

want to hang out with them instead during his fall break. Probably this is nothing to worry about.

“That’s a great idea,” Sam tries for enthusiasm. “It’d be great to be all together again.”

That part isn’t quite a lie. It would be great.

It just isn’t going to happen.

Sam mostly puts it out of her mind. The chances that Freddie’s wish to hang out will happen when he’s going to school like six hours away seem slim. And if there is a time he wants to come down, well, it’ll be easy enough to claim to be busy. This isn’t a big deal.

But just the knowledge that Carly is *actually* coming to Los Angeles is something Sam is having a lot of difficulty setting aside.

She could easily live with never knowing. It’s easy to dwell alongside ignorance. But facts change things. Knowledge redoubles and churns inside her mind, making her wonder about possibility.

August’s full moon falls about two weeks before Sam and Cat’s semester begins. The sense of summer coming to an end is stronger than ever, and so are thoughts of Carly. Has she moved to the city yet? Will she be staying in a dorm, or maybe renting a room somewhere? Did her father manage to get transferred somewhere nearby, or is she on her own? What about Spencer? Would he uproot to take over his semi-parental role?

As Sam and Tori head to their regular clearing in Shadow Creek Park, Tori, too, is talking about college, about trying to figure out with Andre whether they’ll even have time to see each other on campus.

“You know,” Sam ventures, because she can’t keep this to herself any longer, “Carly is going to UCLA, too.”

Tori stops walking, making Sam almost walk into her; she still leads the way into the clearing, even though Sam knows it almost as well as she does by now. “Wait. Really?” Tori asks excitedly.

“That’s what I hear,” Sam shrugs.

“Why didn’t you say so? She’s your best friend, isn’t she?”

“I guess.”

Sam doesn’t know just how much she should disclose to Tori. They’re definitely close friends at this point, all but the memory of the strife that characterized their early interactions remaining. But this is something Sam hasn’t even shared with Cat yet. She’s not sure she wants to. Maybe Cat has a right to know, but Sam is doing her best to make sure that Carly’s presence in the same city is irrelevant to her life, so it should be equally irrelevant to Cat’s. Sam doesn’t *think* Cat still harbors any doubts about their relationship, any lingering

jealousies about Sam's past with Carly, her first love. But in her opinion, it would be best to not even sow the seed, in case there is fertile soil for it to sprout in Cat's mind.

But Tori seems to be so excited about this possibility that she isn't even picking up on Sam's hesitation as she talks eagerly about whether Sam might help her connect with Carly on campus, whether they might all spend time together, whether Sam and Carly might restart *iCarly*, whether Jade or even Robbie might be interested in producing it since Freddie isn't around. It's a little unlike Tori to be quite this talkative; maybe it's the full moon. But it isn't until they're naked and waiting for the change that Sam even finds a break in the babbling to try to clarify something.

"I don't know how much we're really going to want to hang out," Sam informs her. "Carly and I aren't that close anymore."

"Wait, really?" Tori sounds disappointed, "I thought you were best friends."

"We *were*. It's just...complicated."

"Complicated how?" When Sam is quiet, Tori backtracks. "You don't have to tell me. But I'm happy to listen if you want."

Sam glances up at the sky. "Maybe later," she growls, her throat already tightening with the effect of the change.

"Guess so," Tori agrees, mouth already widening into a grin that shows a few too many teeth as the first effects of change start to come over her.

As soon as Sam is a wolf, it's as if a reprieve from everything comes over her. Gone is the anxiety about the end of summer, gone is the fixation with Carly maybe being only mere miles away from her instead of an ocean away, gone is the uncertainty of talking to Tori, replaced with only the joy of running, the euphoria of the scent of Cat on the breeze, and the anticipation of an evening spent chasing Tori and rabbits and any manner of creatures all over the desert under a bright, beautiful moon.

And they do just that, hanging out with their human partners for a while before parting ways and spending time indulging their feral instincts. Sam almost forgets entirely about Carly as they romp and sniff and wag their tails, domesticated creatures satiated by their human sides, in the wild for play and not for survival.

But clearly, Tori doesn't forget, because after they change back at dawn, she asks, "What did you mean about you and Carly not being close anymore?"

Sam prickles a little at being pushed, but a larger part of her is relieved, because maybe it will be a good thing to get this all off her chest, to someone who isn't Cat. So she sighs and tries to decide where to start. "So...Carly and I...were more than best friends," she reveals.

Tori turns to look at her slowly, eyes wide. "You mean like...you were lovers?"

Sam cringes a little at the word. It sounds so *scandalous*, so seedy. Which is maybe exactly why she cringes, because they *did* keep everything a secret. Maybe it's the accuracy of the word that she hates, the way it opens up old wounds, the fact that she wanted to openly date Carly, but never had the chance. "Yeah. It was like an on and off thing for years. Just like, kissing, at first, but trying not to let it be something serious, but eventually we admitted our feelings for each other and fell in love." That is simpler than explaining about the time Sam spent with her unrequited feelings, hoping that Carly might someday feel the same. That part is still hard to talk about. Sam doesn't regret anything, because eventually she and Carly figured things out, but she knows this part of their history doesn't put either of them in the best light. Sam thinks she looks pathetic, lovesick, in retrospect, a fool for hanging on as long as she did, and Carly looks heartless, cruel for using Sam, knowing how Sam felt. But those interpretations are both too simple. Sam had weighed the pleasure of having Carly for a week a month with the pain of not having her the rest of the time and her crush-addled mind had accepted the arrangement, her masochistic streak making the best of the painful times. And Carly had been figuring out her own sexuality, waging a silent, internal battle as she learned about herself and her desires. And Carly, sweet Carly, who always tried to look on the bright side, had taken Sam at her word that she was okay with their arrangement. And Sam had striven to make sure they both believed it.

Tori looks utterly shocked. "How did I never know this? I always assumed that Cat was your first serious girlfriend."

"I don't really tell anybody. Even at the time, we kept our relationship a secret. Carly had her reasons. Not even Freddie knows."

"Wow," Tori murmurs. "Does Cat know?"

"Yeah. She might be the only other one who does. We broke up when Carly moved away, right before she was planning to even tell Spencer." Sam lets out her breath. She's not really one for sharing her feelings, but she has to admit that even just giving Tori the basic facts feels like a load off her chest. "That's why we're not close anymore. Because we broke up... and we really haven't spoken since. It's too awkward. It's too weird. Carly let me know she might be coming to school in the city, but I told her she could do what she wanted, and I didn't think we should see each other. I didn't think anything of it until Freddie told me she was going to UCLA."

"I guess it's good to know in case I do run into her," Tori muses. "But it's a big school. It's probably really unlikely that we'll ever see each other."

"Probably," Sam agrees. "I just didn't want you to go into something awkward blind."

"I appreciate that," Tori smiles. "And I'm glad you told me about what happened between you two. I'm sorry it's left you both where you are."

"I'm not," Sam says bluntly. "If she hadn't left me, I'd never have met Cat. And I'm happier than ever."

"And I guess we wouldn't have these wolf nights together in the park," Tori waxes sentimental.

“Sure, but that’s not nearly the same as Cat.”

“I know,” Tori laughs. “But just in general, I think we’re all glad you’re here, Sam.”

“Guess I can rest easy knowing that.”

When they head back to the parking area, Jade and Cat meet them, and Sam flings herself at Cat, letting Cat hold her, inhaling the scent of her, letting herself feel the joy of having found Cat, of loving Cat, of *Cat Valentine* herself.

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Cat is excited for college.

Okay, that doesn’t mean she wants the summer to end. She’s loving spending time with her friends. Sometimes, it’s a pity she and Sam have to do something productive, like babysitting, because that means less time just being fun and creative with their friends (or fun and creative in bed), but they also have to pay bills and rent. They *almost* score first class plane tickets while taking a job escorting their least favorite charges, two little rich brats, to the Bahamas. But due to circumstances beyond their control, it doesn’t work out. It’s probably for the best. Cat doesn’t like those particular kids, but it’s nothing compared to the contempt Sam has for them. Cat is grateful that she isn’t *quite* as spoiled as these kids, or maybe Sam might never have liked her at all.

She’s *definitely* not as spoiled, since her parents are only helping her pay for community college.

Which, ultimately, Cat is fine with it. She’s especially happy because Sam is attending with her, even if they don’t have any of the same classes. But she has to admit it had stung a little when her dad had stated he didn’t want to pay for her to attend a *traditional* university yet, because he wasn’t sure she’d do well.

It had been hard to hear. Cat had managed to do just fine at Hollywood Arts! Okay, her excellent grades in some of her performing arts classes in some cases had to make up for less stellar grades in some of the core classes, but she also always had Tori to help her with science, or Robbie to help her with math, so she never fell too far behind.

But considering she also doesn’t know what kind of a program she wants to pursue yet, she can also understand her dad wanting her to take time to figure that out first.

Her petty little form of revenge is getting her father to pay for Sam’s school supplies, too, even if he isn’t aware of it.

Though, Sam’s school supplies lead to another snag: neither of them had really considered the fact that Sam would need to buy things like huge drawing pads of paper and her own easel to use at home.

“How am I supposed to take this stuff to and from school?” Sam asks, looking devastated.

“Maybe it’s time to get a car,” Cat suggests.

“Yeah, right,” Sam scoffs. “I only got my bike because it was a gift. We’ve got no credit, no savings. How are we gonna afford a car?” She narrows her eyes dangerously at Cat. “We’re not selling my bike.”

Cat has no intention of suggesting Sam sell her motorcycle. “I wasn’t even thinking that. I was thinking we might ask Nona.”

“To buy us a car?” Sam asks, sounding interested, but skeptical.

“To let us use her car,” Cat corrects. “She barely even leaves Elderly Acres, I don’t think she drives very much.”

“That’s a good idea,” Sam sounds thoughtful. “It’s not good for a car to just sit there for too long. If we’re driving it around, it’s better for it.”

“And you can haul around your art supplies!”

“Yeah, that solves that, too,” Sam smiles. “What kind of car does she drive?”

“I don’t know,” Cat considers. She doesn’t really pay attention to things like this. “I think it’s a sedan? Or maybe it’s a station wagon. What’s the difference again?”

Sam shakes her head, “Okay, don’t worry, it doesn’t matter. Let’s talk to Nona and then we can pick up my school supplies.”

It turns out that Nona drives some kind of late ‘90’s Mercury that Sam looks devastated to behold. Cat can kind of understand it. It’s long and boxy and looks exactly like the kind of car an elderly would drive, not an eighteen year old woman who works on her own motorcycle.

“I can’t believe we’re going to be driving this,” Sam says dully as they slide into the front seats of Nona’s car, having been given the keys; Nona had agreed to them using her car on the condition that they give her rides to places when she needs one.

“It’s not so bad,” Cat tries to encourage Sam. “At least we can carry your art supplies in it.”

“Yeah, but at what cost?” Sam asks darkly. “People will *see* us in it.”

“Since when do you care what people think of you?” Cat challenges affectionately.

“Since your Nona gave us this car,” Sam quips back.

Cat laughs. “Come on, it won’t be that bad.” She leans over the center console to nuzzle Sam’s cheek. “It has a roomy back seat,” she breathes in her ear.

Sam turns to look at her, expression quirked in amusement. “Okay, somehow you’ve made the *least* sexy place in the world, your *grandmother’s* car, sound kinda hot.”

“Then that’s all we need to say to anyone who makes fun of our ride,” Cat says smugly.

Sam laughs fully. “Yeah, okay. ‘Sure, this car may be hideous and smell like a nursing home, but I bang my girlfriend in it, so it’s cool.’ I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Just let me know when you want to break it in,” Cat replies with an exaggerated wink.

Sam’s eyebrows rise. “You’re serious?”

They don’t do it right away. They’re still parked at Elderly Acres, after all. But once they figure out where they can park at their apartment complex, it’s only a few nights later that they hurry out of their apartment to find their car, slip into the backseat, and make love in a new location, christening the car, just for the thrill of it.

Cat loves her sex life with Sam. She loves her *life* with Sam. But they’re still discovering new things about each other when it comes to sex. There’s still a lot Cat wants to try, but some of it is just so difficult to actually *say*. It’s like shame and embarrassment close up her throat when she tries to express her desires.

But she’s *very* happy to continue as they are, with Sam occasionally suggesting something new (like when she went down on Cat for her birthday...which, Cat is *still* waiting to feel bold enough to return the favor someday soon), but with still plenty of ground to cover just with what they’ve explored so far.

Being in love, and expressing that physically, is the most beautiful thing Cat has ever experienced. But there are still occasional doubts that plague her. She was so young when she’d decided to have sex for the first time. She’d felt ready, but...what if it was too early? She’d always been called immature, mostly by her parents, and being the youngest in her peer group had kind of reinforced that...had she made an immature decision when she’d decided to have sex with Sam? They’d only been dating a few months. How can she be sure that Sam is the person she’s going to love for the rest of her life?

Cat knows, intellectually, that having sex with more than one person in a lifetime doesn’t make anyone *bad*. That just has never been her plan for herself. She’d told herself that when she decided to have sex, it would be with the person she was certain she was going to spend her life with.

As certain as she felt then, and as certain as she still feels now, when she’s with Sam, there’s a part of her that worries that she made such a decision too quickly.

But she also believes that they can make things work. They can grow together. And Sam has promised to always choose her. It isn’t a marriage proposal, but in Cat’s mind, it might as well be. And to the best of her ability, she’ll never make choosing her a difficult choice for Sam to keep making, as time goes on.

All that to say...sex is still complicated for Cat, much as she loves having it, and loves sharing it with Sam. She finds that knowledge that counteracts that messages about sex she grew up with helps, a little, but that her doubts and worries and hesitations exist somewhere much deeper in her psyche, somewhere she’s still rooting out.



Cat doesn't really know where to turn to with this, or if she even should. She often thinks she's mostly past all the negative things she was taught, until she is *longing* to suggest to Sam that maybe she might like to go down on her, but somehow cannot force the words out of her mouth. Sam certainly wouldn't understand this hesitation. Everything about her is free, unrestrained; there's not a single part of Sam that ever seems plagued by doubt or hesitation. What Sam wants, Sam sets out to get.

Cat wonders sometimes whether Jade might understand, since she knows Jade is a person with a lot of anxiety in general. But she recalls most of Jade's anxiety about sex was about pregnancy, back when she was dating Beck. Tori seems like a possibility sometimes, because she's generally cautious, and Cat thinks she got dragged to church a few times as a kid, but just like when talking to Sam about the sex they're actually having, Cat can't seem to ever actually broach the subject with Tori about the shame she still wrestles with sometimes.

Maybe it's better to just deal with it on her own.

But her feelings about sex kind of take the back burner in the days leading up to starting classes at the community college. Because her anticipation and nerves seem fully taken up with *college*.

She and Sam ensure they have all the books and school supplies they need. Sam takes some time to pop open the hood of Nona's car and try to make sure it looks to be in good shape, so that they can rest easy knowing they have reliable transportation. They plot out their days—when they'll be on campus, what they'll do if one has a class that meets earlier or later than the other, where they'll meet up if they have time between classes. They discuss how many babysitting gigs they need to aim for to still make enough money but also have enough time to stay on top of homework, though a lot of that is guesswork, since neither of them has any frame of reference for how much work college might be.

Sam seems utterly nonchalant about all of this, as she so often is about most things. But Cat wonders if it's a front, because she wakes up the night before their first day to Sam thrashing in bed, grunting in her throat.

"Sam?" she asks, reaching out to touch her. "Sam, wake up." She gently shakes her.

Sam's eyes fly open and she clumsily sits up in bed, as if her limbs don't quite work yet. "Cat?" she asks quietly. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. You were moving around in your sleep. Were you having a nightmare?"

"I...yeah, I was." Sam sinks back into her pillows, blinking at the ceiling, as if clearing the images away. "I had this weird dream that you went with Dice to Arizona for a teenage hair modeling competition, and while you were there, you attacked another hair model. Just ripped his hair right out of his scalp."

Cat shudders. "Why would I do that?" she asks, horrified.

"You said you thought it was a wig," Sam whispers. "And you got arrested. And I couldn't do anything to help you because Nona kept feeding me food and I can't come to Arizona,

anyway...and I was trying to figure out how to get to you, how to get the police to let you go, when I woke up.”

Cat shivers. “That sounds awful.”

“It was. Except the part where Nona was feeding me. That was pretty great. Actually, I’m pretty hungry.” Sam gets up out of bed, kissing Cat’s forehead and going into the kitchen for a snack.

Like so many things, Sam seems to simply brush off this intense moment and move on with her life.

But Sam’s nightmare keeps Cat up for hours that night, making it difficult to fall back to sleep.

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Out of all of their college-bound friends, Tori and Andre’s classes start last, about a week after Sam and Cat start school, and two weeks after Jade. Tori is still trying to adjust to the new normal of Jade being in classes all day, and already having hours of homework at night, but they’re figuring out how to stay in touch. They text throughout the day, and make sure to have a video chat or a phone call before bed, and they’ve agreed to spend time together Friday evenings and Saturdays whenever possible. At least the fact that they’re both commuting means they’ll be close to each other evenings and weekends, since they live near each other. What they sacrifice in time spent sitting in traffic and money spent on gas during the week (Tori did finally get her driver’s license over the summer), they make up for in proximity on weekends, to spend with each other or with friends, depending on who is available.

But for now, on this final week before classes start, Tori and Andre are largely on their own. Once other people started going back to school, even Beck and Robbie began to buckle down on pursuing acting and comedy, respectively, instead of treating summer like a perpetual party. Not that anyone else was acting differently. Or maybe they’re just enjoying time together. Tori isn’t about to judge.

It’s been good to catch up with Andre, though. They’ve seen each other all summer, but it’s rarely been just the two of them. They go to record stores and music stores in the city, go out for sushi, and hang out at either of their houses—usually Tori’s, whose family is a little less...intense than Andre’s grandmother (which is part of the reason why Andre had decided to live in the dorms at UCLA; as he put it, “No one I might room with could be crazier than my grandma, and I’m used to working around her. I might actually get some peace in the freshmen dorms!”).

Tori values the time they spend together this week. She gets to hear about Andre’s latest dating adventures (he’s still looking for a woman who he’s attracted to but doesn’t drive him insane). Andre indulges her gushing about how much she loves Jade and is genuinely happy for them both. They talk about college, about music, about how it feels to cling to the end of summer.

“Things are going to be so different,” Andre muses.

“I don’t know,” Tori counters thoughtfully, “I’m not so sure they will. I think we’ll all still see each other.”

“Maybe,” Andre seems to consider the notion. “I mean, I’d sure like that to be the case. But who knows? We could all meet new friends. Beck might start getting regular work and he’ll have to wake up so early while we’ll all be night owls trying to finish our homework.”

“We’d still hear from him through Robbie,” Tori suggests.

“And Jade might meet a bunch of weird film nerds who actually *want* to go watch existential French horror movies with her.”

“I’d still go with her to those movies,” Tori insists.

Andre spreads his hands. “I guess maybe that’s what I’m realizing. You guys are all coupled up, so you’ll always have some tie to our friend group, as long as you’re dating each other. But I’m the seventh wheel. And it’s kinda always been that way. Jade and Beck have both dated two people in the friend group. And you and Cat even dated the same guy that one time.”

Tori laughs, “Okay, but I don’t think either of us even think about Danny anymore.”

“No, I don’t think so either,” Andre agrees. “I guess I’m trying to say I’m worried about me, being left behind. It’s really me who’s most likely to meet a bunch of new people. I’m the one who’s going to be in the dorms. And if I date somebody seriously, it’s probably going to be someone I meet at school. It’s easy for you guys to bring whoever you’re dating to a group hang out, because they’re already in the group. It’s going to be harder for me to find someone who will click with all the rest of us. And you know I’m already picky.”

Tori wants to counter that Andre isn’t *that* picky. In fact, she kind of thinks his problem is more that he doesn’t pick *well*. She’s seen him date for status (Hope Quincy, as a connection to her music producer father), she’s seen him date for physicality (that girl he took to the Prom...Tori doesn’t even remember her name). But she’s never seen Andre date for love. Not, like, real love, beyond infatuation. The closest example she can think of is his previous crush on Jade. It’s even weirder to look back on now.

But Andre isn’t asking her opinion on his love life, and frankly, it isn’t any of Tori’s business. And maybe she’s being a bit naive, hoping things won’t change so drastically. But she means it when she says she wants to always be a part of her high school friends’ lives.

“Andre, whoever you date, I’m going to like them because you do. You’re one of my best friends.”

Andre casts her a skeptical glance. “Have you *ever* liked someone I’ve dated?”

“Well...no,” Tori admits. “But it’s not like I’d ever have told you that if you didn’t ask! And I never met Keeko,” she finishes.

Andre laughs, “Hey, I get it. *I* don’t even really like anyone I’ve dated. Except Keeko. But I guess she just didn’t like me,” he adds, a little sullen.

Tori stops herself from pointing out that his tendency not to like the women he dates is exactly his problem. “Look, I mean it, though. I always want to be a part of your life. But... you’re right that we’re all going to meet people in college that we might get along with really, really well. I mean, I know you’ll probably meet people that you can collaborate musically with even better than you and I.”

“Not possible,” Andre says flatly, but then cracks a smile. “Or at least, I’d never, ever let you know it.”

“And I appreciate you lying to spare my feelings,” Tori grins. “This kind of dynamic will be good practice for the kinds of industries we’re trying to get into.”

“And we could both use some practice with lying,” Andre sighs. “I guess I’m just nervous.”

“I know. I am, too. But it’ll be alright. If nothing else, we can all keep in touch on SplashFace.”

But the more she hears Andre talk about being worried about being left behind, Tori begins to realize that she’s more worried about him leaving her, and all the rest of their friends, behind.

At the same time, Tori is fairly certain that she’s going to remain close to her old friends. Especially Sam and Cat, considering they’re planning to continue their monthly Shadow Creek Park tradition as best they can. Sure, she’ll meet new people in college. Sure, she may even make good friends. But she can’t imagine meeting someone she’ll feel comfortable being her whole self with, not like she can be with Jade, Sam and Cat.

But she figures it’ll take time for her to make any new friends, especially living off campus. It’s not like she’ll run into someone at her first class who will say hello and offer to strike up a friendship. This isn’t kindergarten.

However, during Tori’s very first class, an introductory theater class, she’s surprised to see a familiar face among a sea of unknown students.

And it isn’t Andre.

Carly Shay settles into the seat next to Tori’s, solidly in the middle of the classroom, the kind of neutral seat Tori likes to choose whenever possible. There’s a brief moment in which their eyes meet, in a flash of recognition...and then Tori drops her gaze, remembering what Sam had said.

Sam and Carly aren’t best friends anymore. In fact, Sam doesn’t even really want to see her or talk to her at all. Sam hadn’t said so explicitly, but Tori gets the sense that Carly had broken her heart. Why else would she be content to let a close friendship fall by the wayside and not want to reconnect? Tori knows Sam well enough to know that she has a tendency to shy away from vulnerability, but that she’s also fiercely loyal. Being heartbroken is about as vulnerable as a person can get, or so Tori assumes, and is the only explanation that makes

sense to her for why Sam would not be interested in having Carly back in her life, when she's so *close* and *present* and *literally sitting right next to* *Tori*.

Tori focuses on her textbook and her little three ring binder full of notebook paper, checks her backpack to make sure she has plenty of pens to write with. Which, of course she does, she meticulously packed her school supplies last night. It's all a show, to avoid Carly.

Still, she has a sense that she has Carly's attention, she *feels* Carly's hesitation as she tries to figure out what to say to break the ice, and Tori tries to think quickly, tries to think of how she can respond, when the professor comes striding in, and class begins.

Tori sags in her seat, relieved. A moment later, she sits back up and gives her full attention to the professor. There's no reason to pay Carly any attention now.

Except that Carly's presence in the seat next to her feels *palpable*. Tori literally *can't* ignore her.

She manages to pay attention in class, however. At least to the point where she doesn't feel that she missed anything important. But her mind also wanders frequently to Carly.

What are the odds that they'd end up sitting next to each other in the same class? Well, okay, the sitting next to each other part was intentional, at least from Carly's end. Though also, she didn't seem to notice Tori until just before she sat down next to her. Maybe they just both liked seats in the middle of a classroom. Even so, that isn't a matter of *odds*, per se.

As Tori muddles over that, she abruptly remembers what Sam had told her several months before.

Carly is a werewolf, too.

After that, it's even harder to ignore her.

As far as Tori can tell, there's no *innate* sense that alerts werewolves to the presence of another. It would be awfully useful if there were, but aside from the time she and Sam engaged in some instinctive territorial circling, Tori has never heard of anyone *knowing* right off the bat that another person is a werewolf. The truth is that werewolves look, sound, smell and feel basically identical to humans. But as Tori sits next to Carly, senses attuned to her, she imagines she can catch the lingering scent of the full moon on her skin. Something that she *knows* isn't actually real.

Tori is sitting next to another werewolf in her theater class and now that she's aware of it, she can't help but want to speak to Carly herself. But she reminds herself, again, what Sam told her. Sam doesn't want Carly in her life.

And Tori's loyalties are with Sam. Really, they have been since Cat started dating her, even if things were rocky at first, because Tori and Cat are so close. But the confrontation with Sam's mother had really cemented things: she and Sam have each other's backs.

Tori can't help but feel like befriending Sam's ex-girlfriend would be a betrayal.

Well, at least she and Carly didn't end up circling each other in the middle of the classroom. Though, maybe in a theater class, they could get away with it. If this professor is anything like Sikowitz, self-expression can explain away just about anything.

Tori is so lost in her ruminations about werewolves and friendship and loyalty that she misses the moment when class ends, which means she can't bolt out the door like she'd intended to, in another attempt to avoid Carly. As she gathers up her notebook and backpack, she feels Carly approach her, even before she sees her out of the corner of her eye.

"Hi!" Carly smiles warmly, "You're Tori, right?"

Tori has only a split second to decide how to respond, and Carly's smile has already coaxed a responsive one out of her. "Oh, hi!" Tori replies cheerfully, before she realizes she has no idea what else to say, and closes her mouth.

Carly's smile falters slightly, but she continues on. "Carly," she explains, pointing to herself in such a self-effacing way that Tori is utterly charmed by the surreality of having Carly Shay from *iCarly* introduce herself to her. "We met a couple years ago at a party."

"I remember," Tori holds her notebook against her chest, shifting a little closer to Carly as students move past them to exit the room. "Of course I know who you are. I just...didn't think you'd want to talk to me."

Carly tilts her head curiously. "Why wouldn't I? Honestly, it's just nice to see a familiar face. I just moved here, so I really don't know anyone yet."

"Well, I guess you know me!" Tori offers awkwardly, already wincing at the way she has totally stabbed Sam in the back. She wonders if she can make her escape now.

"Listen, so," Carly begins hesitantly, "Maybe we should exchange phone numbers? You know, in case we have any questions about any assignments for this class. It'd be good to have, like...a classroom buddy, you know?"

It's a good idea. One that Tori can't see any reason to say no to. "Oh my gosh, yes!" Tori agrees, more enthusiastically than she means to. She's supposed to be giving Carly the cold shoulder, damn it, not giving Carly her number. She considers altering a digit, just to feel like she's still maintaining her loyalty to Sam, but as Carly texts her just afterwards to ensure Tori has her number, too, she knows it would not have worked anyway.

And honestly, as someone who used to watch the *iCarly* webshow and marvel at how pretty Carly Shay was, and as someone who finds her delightfully charming in person, Tori doesn't feel at all in the position to say no. Especially not to an actually decent suggestion for the sake of school.

Phone numbers exchanged, Carly smiles at Tori again. "Thank you," she says gratefully. "I'm really glad that you're in this class with me. I'm not really sure how I'm going to find people in my other classes to talk to."

"Oh, it won't be that bad. You're friendly," Tori encourages.

“I guess. But I met my best friend when she tried to steal my sandwich and I pushed her over. I don’t think that works when you’re not eight.”

Tori notes the way Carly gives no indication that Sam—because that absolutely has to be about Sam—isn’t still her best friend. She also realizes that Carly has a good point. “You know what, I hadn’t even thought about that. Maybe I need to find classroom buddies in all my other classes.”

“It seems like a good strategy,” Carly agrees. “By the time we all get to high school, everybody knows each other, so you always have someone you can call. But college is starting from scratch.”

“I sort of had to start from scratch in high school,” Tori reveals as they begin to walk out of the classroom together. “I transferred to Hollywood Arts in the middle of my sophomore year. The only person I knew there was my sister, and she was no help at all. But I was lucky that some other students wanted to befriend me right away. Like Andre and Cat.” She clamps her jaw shut. *Way to go, Tori, bring up Sam’s girlfriend to her ex, why don’t you.*

But Carly doesn’t seem to notice Tori’s faux pas. How could she? Instead, she casts Tori an appraising sort of look. “Maybe I should be following your lead when it comes to making new school friends, then.”

“I don’t know about that,” Tori replies. “Transferring to a new school is different. Everyone notices you when you’re a new student. Here, I’m just another freshman.”

“A freshman who sang at the Platinum Music Awards,” Carly points out with an admiring grin.

“Well, you’re a webshow star,” Tori counters. “You’re definitely more famous than I am.”

Carly shrugs. “I guess.” She seems to brush off the mention of her show in a way that Tori can almost feel, but she does so with a casual nonchalance that seems natural, not at all awkward, even as Tori realizes that the subject of Sam, implied through the mention of the webshow, must be just as awkward for Carly. She changes the subject. “Where’s your next class?” she asks.

“Um,” Tori pulls out her PearPhone to check her schedule. “English composition, in another building.”

“Too bad,” Carly laments, “I have that class Tuesdays and Thursdays. I wanted this time slot, but it was already full when I picked my classes.”

“Maybe someone will drop and you can transfer,” Tori suggests before she can think better of it.

Carly lights up. “Yeah! Maybe I’ll come with you to get on the waiting list for the class.” Carly falls into step with Tori.

Who is kicking herself for suggesting yet *another* way to get closer to Carly Shay.

Maybe there is something instinctive about werewolf interactions. Maybe that's what's drawing Tori to Carly right now—a deep sense of recognition, of sameness, that makes them feel connected.

Or maybe Carly is just friendly, someone Tori has long looked up to, and the first person at college to make Tori feel at ease. Maybe it really is that simple, and giving Carly the cold shoulder is difficult because that's also not really in Tori's nature. Even when Sam was actively resenting Tori, Tori still attempted to make a connection with her. No, Tori doesn't shut people out. Tori gives as good as she gets. Jade West is proof of that.

As they walk, Carly asks, "So are you a theater major?"

They chat about their respective interests in the School of Theater, Film and Television (Tori is there hoping to hone her skills as an actress, while Carly is more interested in digital media production) as they walk to Tori's next class together, and by the time Tori is finished on campus for the day, she is certain she's ruined any chance of maintaining her friendship with Sam.

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Sam's classes are going okay. It helps that she isn't that interested in her grades, because that keeps the pressure low. The first couple of class periods, the professor talks a lot more than Sam expects, but once they're actually working on their projects, Sam starts to feel more at ease. She likes being able to just zone out and work on something, and she's enjoying learning different techniques and how to use different mediums in her various classes. If this is what college can be, well, maybe Sam can totally hang with it.

In the middle of Tori's first week of classes, about a week before the next full moon, she texts Sam that she really needs to talk to her before they get together in Shadow Creek Park for the full moon. It's a little unexpected, but Sam figures it must be something serious. Maybe there's another werewolf in one of her classes or something.

So that Friday, Sam tells Cat she's going to go to the wolfsbane dispensary with Tori. It's the best way to make sure Cat knows she can't tag along, since Tori clearly wants to speak privately.

"Okay, have fun! And hurry back!" Cat instructs with faux sternness.

Sam laughs and kisses her. "I won't be gone long," she promises, giving her a coy little smile. "You know I can't stay away from you."

"I know," Cat replies cockily, surprising Sam a little. This leads to another, more extended kiss, as Sam marvels at how damn funny and *sexy* her girlfriend is.

But finally, she pulls away. "Okay, I've really got to go."

"I know," Cat grabs her hand and kisses her knuckles. "Have fun!" she says again.



Sam climbs onto her motorcycle—always her preferred ride when given a choice—and heads out to meet Tori. They meet at a Jet Brew not too far from Tori’s college, since Tori herself has just finished with her classes and hasn’t even gone home yet. Tori is already there when Sam steps into the coffee shop and orders at the counter.

But when Sam begins to walk over to join Tori at one of the tiny tables along the far wall opposite the counter, she stops, abruptly, her nose catching a familiar scent, one she’ll never forget in all her years.

*Carly.*

Sam can smell her. It’s a very faint whiff, difficult to discern beneath the strong aromas of coffee and the multitudes of people that must pass through here in a day. If it weren’t a scent Sam knew extremely well, she’s certain she would have overlooked it. But the clean lavender smell of her skin, the essence of *Carly* herself, is unmistakable, and makes Sam’s breath catch in her throat, her heart squeeze in her chest.

And a moment later, it seems to be gone. Sam brushes it off. This is a coffee shop close to UCLA. It’s entirely reasonable that Carly may have visited it. But it’s not relevant to her intention to meet Tori here, not even worth bringing up to Tori, who seems to have noticed Sam faltering and casts her a concerned look.

“What’s wrong?” Tori asks as Sam sits down across from her. She sounds nervous, but probably that’s because of whatever big issue she called Sam here to talk about.

“Nothing,” Sam waves a hand, feeling the action like a literal reset, pushing Carly away. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay,” Tori agrees hesitantly. “What did you order?” she asks.

“Just a black coffee. Probably should’ve just waited up there, it won’t take them long—”

“Black coffee for Sam!” the barista shouts in a rote tone, placing the paper cup on the bar.

“As I was saying,” Sam offers a brief smile as she gets back up to retrieve her coffee and rejoins Tori a moment later. “What’d you order?” she asks, sniffing to try to get a sense of the contents of Tori’s cup.

“Hazelnut latte,” Tori replies just as Sam recognizes the aroma and catches another faint whiff of Carly that makes the hair on her arms stand up, as if Carly is a ghost, eerily haunting Sam’s cup of coffee. The goosebumps fade quickly into a tingle of pleasure at the recognition of Carly’s scent, a primal enjoyment that Sam can’t deny, as much as she feels itchy at the fact that she’s apparently spending time in the same place that Carly had been, maybe only an hour before.

“Smells good,” Sam comments on Tori’s drink, still not wanting to mention Carly.

“It is,” Tori replies, eyes dropping to her cup as she takes a sip. When she sets the cup back down, she shifts in her seat and glances up at Sam with her head still lowered, and Sam reads

right away that Tori feels...guilty?

She narrows her eyes. "What's going on?" she asks Tori, a note of suspicion in her voice.

Tori closes her eyes briefly, mouth tightening. "I've messed up," she murmurs quietly, "And I owe you an apology."

Sam leans back in her seat, eyes not leaving Tori's face. "Okay," she says slowly, "For what?"

Tori's expression takes on a mildly pleading quality. "Sam, I want you to know that I really value our friendship. It means a lot to me that we can be...ourselves with each other. And you know I adore Cat. And we both know that Jade would never actually say it in so many words...but she adores you, too."

"You're right. Jade would *never* say *anything* like that." Sam's tone is still firm, waiting for Tori to get to the point, but they both crack a small smile at the notion of Jade being so openly affectionate with anyone who isn't Tori.

"And so what I'm about to tell you...please know that I feel really terrible about it. I feel like I've wronged you, and I hope you can forgive me."

"Tori, just get to the point," Sam snaps impatiently.

Tori lets out a breath. "My first class at school, Carly came in and sat right next to me."

Tori stops speaking, probably because of the way Sam slumps back, pieces already falling into place. "*My* Carly?" she asks, before she can stop the words, and she realizes in a moment that it isn't because Carly was *here* that Sam can smell her. Sam can smell her *on Tori*.

"Yeah," Tori confirms miserably. "And I ended up befriending her," she finishes in the same tone, head hanging in disgrace.

Sam takes in the words, but mostly, she takes in another breath, knowing now why she can smell Carly, she focuses her attention on finding the lingering scent of her on Tori, assessing what it means. It isn't strong—they probably didn't touch each other much—but she thinks it's recent. "Were you with her just before you came here?" she asks.

"No," Tori shakes her head, looking up at Sam uncertainly, "We saw each other earlier today, though."

Sam nods in satisfaction. "That explains why I could smell her when I came in."

"I was worried about that," Tori grimaces, but then she regards Sam curiously. "Are you angry with me?"

Sam frowns. "Why would I be angry with you? Did you say something to her?"

"No!" Tori insists. "No, I just...you and I are close, so I thought that being friendly to her...would be a betrayal to you."

“You thought I wanted you to be an asshole to Carly?” Sam asks, mildly incredulous.

“Well, yeah! She hurt you and you don’t want anything to do with her! And as your friend, I should be backing you up.”

Sam shakes her head, “I don’t need you to fight with Carly for me,” she says bluntly.

“You don’t?”

“Of course not! Just because I don’t want her in my life doesn’t mean I’m going to say the rest of you can’t even talk to her.” Maybe Sam has grown up a little. She remembers times in middle and high school in which she and Carly were a unit, and anyone who didn’t like the other was no friend to either of them. But then, Carly has always been a special circumstance to Sam. Even now, maybe it’s because it’s *Carly* that Sam is being so lenient about this. Spoiling Carly’s chances at making connections and making friends from afar is simply too cruel to do to her, when she has been Sam’s definition of connection and friendship for so much of her life.

“Wow, okay,” Tori sits back, looking relieved. “Because I really didn’t try to befriend her,” she explains quickly. “But she approached me, and she was a familiar face, and I realized it would be a good idea to have a friend in my classes that I could talk to about school, and—”

“Really, it’s fine,” Sam cuts her off. “Like, I get it. I wasn’t friends with her for half my life for no reason. Carly’s great. What’s between us is *our* shit. As long as I don’t have to see her...yeah, do whatever you want with her. You two will probably get along great.”

“I think we might,” Tori agrees, already sounding more hopeful and eager. “I...guess maybe I assumed what you would want as support from me when it comes to her.”

“And you were wrong,” Sam says bluntly. “I don’t hate Carly. I don’t want anything bad to happen to her just because she’s out of my life and it’s going to stay that way.”

“I get that now,” Tori nods. “Thanks, Sam. I feel a lot better.”

“Good. You still up for meeting at the park next weekend?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Tori promises.

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Carly Shay is no stranger to being in new situations, especially lately, moving from Seattle to Italy to Los Angeles in the span of about a year and a half. And usually, she embraces change wholeheartedly, as well as she can. She moved from Seal Beach to Seattle as a child, and though leaving behind her then-best friend, Missy, had been hard, she’d be quickly replaced by Sam, who’d essentially attached herself to Carly immediately after deciding she liked her.

The move to Italy had been tougher, not least because she’d had to leave behind Sam to do it. It still hurts to think back on the decision she’d had to make, and sometimes, Carly wonders if she regrets it. She doesn’t really let herself dwell there, though, because Italy had been overall an amazing experience. She’d gotten to spend time with her father for the first time

since she was very young, she'd made some friends, learned a new language, ate some of the best food of her life, and kissed (and went further with) some very hot people. She feels like she learned a lot about herself during her year in Italy.

But it had been really hard, not being able to talk to Sam, with only a collection of postcards to give her any indication of Sam's whereabouts and state of mind, and those stopped coming after a few months and then...nothing. She would have wondered if Sam was even alive if she were anyone else besides Sam Puckett. She also wondered if Sam was in jail, but then she figured that in prison, Sam would be bored enough to send her a letter or an email or something. No, she had to assume that wherever Sam was, she must be happy, if she'd decided not to even let Carly know that she was still upset with her.

Carly hadn't even known where Sam ended up, but had sent Spencer a Christmas gift early, with Sam's gift packed in the same box, and asked him to send it to her. If he wondered why she hadn't sent it herself, he didn't ask, nor did he ask her for Sam's address. Carly assumes he found her address and sent the gift himself. She's always wondered how shrewd Spencer actually is, whether he, as Sam suspected, knew about their relationship even without them telling him. Spencer has always been difficult to read. He seems alternately completely absorbed in his own life and art to the point that Carly felt she could get away with anything in high school, yet also weirdly insightful at times. Maybe Spencer not asking her any questions about Sam is his way of respecting the relationship he knows existed, but also knows his sister never told him about. Or he's just completely oblivious. There's no way to know.

But keeping that secret—because there's no reason to tell anyone in their lives, now that it's over—also weighs on Carly. She hasn't told her father, mostly because she pretty much has decided to never tell him about any relationship until she's engaged, because she suspects he'll become a weirdly overprotective dad about it. She hasn't told Freddie, because she knows it will hurt him, and it hardly seems to matter now. Carly got what she'd wanted: a secret relationship. So secret that only she and Sam know about it, and they aren't even talking, and Carly has to carry it around herself, alone, a heartache as secret as the relationship it stems from.

Because despite the handful of Italians (of more than one gender) that Carly had connected with over the past year, she hadn't experienced anything close to the intimacy that she and Sam had shared. She'd had crushes, been infatuated, even briefly thought she'd fallen in love with someone, but it turns out it's very difficult to stumble across a comparable replacement for someone who had been her best friend, lover, and packmate all in one perfectly funny and protective and attractive and endearingly *annoying* package that is Sam Puckett.

And now Carly is in the same city as Sam, and Sam doesn't want to see her.

*That* hurts, maybe more than the breakup itself. Those feelings had snuck up on Carly, a little bit. She'd been devastated to lose Sam when she'd left for Italy, but she'd also been excited for her move. And a part of her had also believed that Sam was going to change her mind about not wanting to stay in their relationship. Carly had assumed she'd hear from Sam within a week, telling her that she still loved her, that she didn't care how far apart they were, that wasn't going to change.

And in a way, Carly was right. She *did* hear from Sam about a week later, with the arrival of her first postcard that she'd evidently sent soon after Carly had left the country. And as the postcards continued to arrive, it became clear pretty quickly that Sam *did* still love Carly, even if she didn't say so explicitly.

But it had been equally clear that Sam was still angry with Carly, still hurt, heartbroken. Feelings Carly could identify with, but she had no way to express any of that back to Sam. Sam wouldn't answer her calls, texts, or emails; Carly had a feeling she'd been blocked. And with Sam constantly on the road, there was no way to write her back. And when she'd stopped sending the postcards, Carly was left adrift, without even the comfort of a piece of cardstock with a place name on it to be the smallest tether to the person she missed the most in all the world.

But then, a conversation with Freddie had revealed where Sam was living: Los Angeles. It's a delicate line to walk, whenever she and Freddie inevitably discuss Sam. It's part of why Carly doesn't talk to him so much. Because admitting she isn't speaking to Sam would open up questions about their relationship that Carly doesn't know how to answer without admitting the whole truth. So she'd pretended not to be surprised when Freddie mentioned getting a call from Sam's roommate stating Sam was in the hospital and rushing down to Los Angeles to visit her, only to discover Sam was fine and to end up in the hospital himself.

Los Angeles.

It was an appealing prospect. Carly had lived near there as a child, though they hadn't ventured into the city proper very often, but she remembered the pleasant coastal southern California weather. And, of course, the majesty of a city like that, where stars are born or burn out, was intriguing. When she and Freddie had that conversation, Carly was already in the position of trying to figure out what was next for her, with her impending high school graduation. And as much as she loved living in Italy, a part of her was ready to go home, where she could speak her native language and drink a Groovy Smoothie and chow down on a spaghetti taco without offending every single person around her.

And if she could go home to Sam Puckett, all the better.

Maybe it was naïve, to hope that Sam would be ready to welcome her back, after almost a year of radio silence. But Carly likes to think of herself as optimistic. And maybe she could be excused for thinking that what she'd had with Sam is special enough to weather the time and distance they'd been apart. Carly had never been in love before Sam, not that deep love that consumed her so completely. It's a common mistake, to think that your first love will last forever.

But instead, Sam had written back to tell her, in no uncertain terms, that not only would they not be rekindling their romance, but they weren't even going to be friends. As far as Sam is concerned, clearly, they're going to be living in the same city without ever acknowledging each other.

It had been a disappointing postcard to receive, perhaps the most heartbreaking one of all. Carly could accept not picking back up their relationship; god knew she'd tried to move on

from Sam, with several different people, so it wasn't exactly a surprise to discover that Sam had successfully moved on from their previous relationship.

What *really* hurt was discovering that Sam doesn't even want to be friends anymore.

It's still something Carly struggles with. Just like her attempts at romance, she'd made other friends since leaving Seattle, but no one has been as good a friend to her as Sam Puckett had been.

Still, she tries to be happy for Sam. She believes she's genuinely happy for Sam for finding love. Sam deserves that. It's harder to be happy for her for preferring to cut Carly out of her life entirely, for not even being interested in the offer of friendship.

Carly had already made her decision, though. She is going to Los Angeles for college.

She's just going to be doing it without Sam.

And that's not something she'd ever anticipated, ever planned for. Back when they were younger, before she'd left for Italy, before they'd broken up, they'd discussed what would come after high school a few times. Sam had never been all that interested in college, but had always vowed that she would follow Carly anywhere, that they could live together if she wanted to go to school outside of Seattle, and find some way to make money.

When it comes down to it, Carly is still adjusting to a Sam-less life. She doesn't know if she'll ever fully recover from the loss.

She's nervous about her first day at college, at the first time in her life in which she feels like she's venturing out truly on her own. But walking into her first class and realizing, as it happens, that she's sitting down next to someone she *knows* feels like a very auspicious omen.

She remembers meeting Tori Vega for the first time, the way she'd approached Carly, Sam and Freddie so openly, with such a friendly manner, making her look a lot less like Shelby Marx in person. It had been a surreal experience, discovering that the other girl her boyfriend had been dating is actually pretty cool, and that she was just as eager to get revenge on him. Though it was ultimately just a small event in a crazy spur of the moment trip to Los Angeles, it had been immortalized on their webshow. And it had been significant enough that over two years later, Carly recognizes Tori immediately, even in the strange and disorienting setting of the UCLA classroom.

But in that moment, Tori looks more like Shelby Marx than ever, with the way her face goes stoic and she seems to not notice Carly whatsoever. Carly feels certain that Tori had seen her when she walked in, and recognized her, but she's ignoring Carly completely now. It seems weird, but Carly is far too excited to be sitting next to a familiar face to *not* say something when class lets out.

Tori is...less friendly than Carly remembers. Not that she's rude. It's more than she seems distracted. Maybe she's as overwhelmed as Carly is to be here, on this large campus full of strangers. But after a few minutes of awkward conversation, she begins to warm up to Carly.

It's a relief, honestly. Carly hadn't considered the possibility of seeing anyone else she knows in this city other than Sam. What are the odds that she'd choose the seat next to Tori Vega, the girl she'd shared a boyfriend with, who'd appeared on her webshow, who she'd partied with at Kenan Thompson's house?

Maybe Sam is out of her life for good. And maybe there will never be another perfect fit in her life like Sam, someone she can rely on to support her as a best friend, to make love to her in a way she can feel in her bones, to run beneath the full moon with her, filled with joy.

But maybe, at the very least, Carly can make a friend. Maybe even a best friend. She and Tori have some things in common—taste in lousy boyfriends, an appreciation for performance, a preference for sitting in the middle of a classroom. Is it enough to build a best friendship off of? Well, honestly, it might be, considering Carly and Sam have almost nothing in common and yet managed to become as close as two people can be.

Tori seems very hesitant during the first week that she and Carly see each other on campus. It's awkward, and Carly can't figure out why. Tori seems pleased with her presence, and eager to see her, but will have moments in which she shies away, mid-conversation, as if she's changed her mind about being friends. Yet she gives no direct indication that she *doesn't* want Carly's friendship.

It's a little baffling. On Friday, when Carly asks what she's up to that weekend, Tori is strangely evasive, which leaves Carly feeling even more confused.

It's not enough to make her want to confront Tori, though. Carly chalks it up to it being the first week of school, to both of them still finding their footing in all of this. And by the next week, Tori is already more openly pleasant with her. It's confusing, but Carly doesn't worry about it too much. She recalls that Tori had been a fan of *iCarly*, back when they'd met before. Maybe she'd been a little shy with Carly that first week, had worried about saying the wrong thing to someone she'd once admired. Though, maybe Carly shouldn't assume Tori ever admired her. Maybe she's embarrassed to be seen with someone who found fame during their adolescence by being ridiculous in front of a camera. Carly's still proud of what they'd managed to accomplish with their webshow, but she knows it isn't everyone's cup of tea.

But after a good week, with Tori being warm and engaging, when Carly asks about her weekend plans, again, Tori gets oddly standoffish.

Okay, then. Maybe they're only meant to be school friends.

It's fine, Carly decides. She can keep her friendships separate. School friends and...real life friends. If she ever actually finds some of those. And she kinda needs werewolf friends. She has Spencer looking into how she can connect with the local werewolf community out here, but no luck so far. Good thing she still has a lot of wolfsbane, because she also still hasn't figured out where it's safe to go to be outside as a wolf around here. She's only just got here, after all, and the full moon falls in her second week of school.

She wonders if she'll have to crack and contact Sam and beg her to at least tell her where to buy wolfsbane. It might be easier to face Sam after crossing her boundaries than to convince

Spencer that there's a good reason he needs to drive down and bring wolfsbane with him. But she won't have to worry about this for another several months, at least.

And maybe by then, she'll have met another werewolf.



## Southern-Sorrow

Film school is equal parts exasperating and enthralling. Sometimes, Jade wonders what her classmates are even doing here; have some of them never even seen a film before? Did they just want to do this because it sounds cool? But aside from the idiots who don't even know what a DSLR is and the pretentious dude bros who think that the fact that they've made one short film on their PearPhone makes them an accomplished auteur, Jade has found a couple of tolerable people in her program, and is eagerly delving into the class material. Some of it is new, some isn't. Hollywood Arts, not to mention Jade's own independent drive to learn everything she can about filmmaking, has given her a solid start in her program.

The hardest part is not seeing Tori every day.

Obviously, they both knew that the shift to college would mean seeing less of each other. But it isn't until it's actually happening that it sinks in for Jade, that the person she's seen almost every day for over two years (even if half that time Jade had been trying to convince herself that she hated Tori) is someone she has to find time to text or video chat with during the week because her absence is plainly felt. Maybe it's just the fact that she's in school, and school had always been the one place she was guaranteed to see Tori.

At least there are weekends to look forward to.

Full moon weekend in particular is a ritual that feels nice to maintain. That Friday, when Jade has been in school for about a month and Tori has only been in school for two weeks, Sam and Cat meet them at Tori's, they have some dinner together, and then Jade drives them all to the park. Tori and Sam wander off together to change, she and Cat throw toys for them and laugh and play for awhile, before she and Cat go back to Jade's house, leaving Tori and Sam to run around all night and sniff everything or whatever it is they do together. Even after having dated Tori for a year and a half, Jade still doesn't quite understand the experience of being a werewolf. She just knows it makes Tori special, and fascinating, and, when the full moon approaches, horny as hell.

So overall, it makes Tori a great girlfriend.

But Jade does value getting to spend time with Cat. Jade historically never really had a lot of female friends (in part because historically she never really had a lot of friends, period, and usually, that was exactly the way she liked it), but Cat had managed to befriend her back in middle school. Mostly by continuing to talk to her and refusing to leave her alone. Jade is never sure what led Cat to even want to be her friend, but despite the fact that Cat sometimes babbles about things Jade doesn't understand, or that Jade delights in terrifying her, the friendship has endured.

Jade also knows that dating Beck, and later Tori, meant she had less time for her friendship with Cat through most of high school. Not because she didn't want to hang out with her, but because her relationships took up a lot of her free time. She'd been so singularly focused on Beck that letting him out of her sight filled her with anxiety, mostly about him cheating on

her with another girl (which, looking back, she'd been concerned about entirely the wrong gender). And hanging out with Tori is actually *fun*, instead of feeling like an obligation like it sometimes had with Beck, particularly early in their relationship. Those impulses had calmed down the last time she and Beck had dated, probably because both of them had moved on from the romance of their relationship, even if they hadn't yet realized it. But with Tori, even their bickering is fun, and Jade wants to spend every possible moment with her funny, sweet, nerdy, and *weird* werewolf girlfriend.

Adding Cat's connection with Sam to Jade actually enjoying spending time with her partner, and their senior year, generally, hadn't allowed for much one on one time together. So it's good that full moons allow them to create rituals of their own.

Their rituals have been slightly different on school nights, but this is a weekend, and they've had a summer of full moons to find a groove. It involves snacks, pizza, soda, movies, and, of course, chatting with each other—a stereotypical teen girl sleepover, in other words, though if Jade allows herself to think of it that way, she'll want to change things, and this works for them both.

And tonight, there's plenty to talk about, now that they're both in college. Jade complains about the idiots in her classes, Cat remarks that she wishes the general education credits she's taking to get them over with were more interesting, but she's happy where she is, and she's happy Sam is with her. Jade is a little envious of the two of them, the fact that they live together and go to school together and generally spend all their free time together. Though at the same time, she wonders if she and Tori might drive one another insane if they had to share an apartment.

Maybe it'll be good to wait to move in together until they can afford a place bigger than a studio. Though come to think of it, Jade doesn't know how Sam and Cat manage their rent on top of school, but then, she also knows Cat's parents are fairly well off, and maybe Nona's old apartment is rent controlled or something. That's a thing she's heard of. Or maybe the rumors of Sam's delinquency are true, and she has her ways of making money that Jade doesn't need to know about.

Either way, it's none of her business. And it's a true testament to her friendship with Cat that Jade is able to set her nosiness aside on this one.

There's something else going on with Cat, though. Jade can sense it, even as their conversation stays relaxed and enjoyable. Something is on Cat's mind. After a while, though, they switch to watching a movie (they agree on *Harold and Maude*, because the dark humor suits Jade, and the love story suits Cat), but even as they're watching it, Jade can tell that Cat's mind is somewhere else.

Finally, in the middle of the movie (one of Jade's favorite scenes, too; Cat has always had the most impeccable timing), Cat mumbles something that Jade doesn't quite hear, but that she knows is inflected as a question.

Jade has a choice to make. She can continue staring at the screen, pretending she doesn't hear Cat, and enjoy her movie. It's what she *wants* to do, it's the *appropriate* thing to do, because in what world is Cat interrupting a good movie with inane questions ever acceptable? It's

taken years to get to the point where Cat doesn't interrupt movies every five seconds when she watches with Jade, so Jade knows Cat must have a reason to say something now.

What Jade wants to do isn't necessarily what she *should* do. So Jade sighs heavily and reaches for the remote.

Dating Tori has *really* softened her up. But if anyone else ever says so, she'll kill them.

"What was that?" she asks Cat.

Cat looks like she regrets saying anything. Is she blushing? Finally, she says, "How do I... talk to Sam?"

Jade stares at her incredulously, trying to make sense of the bizarre question. "You mean to tell me that you and Sam spend every day together and you don't talk," she drawls.

"No, I mean." Cat looks away. "I want to talk to her about something...*private*."

"Something private," Jade repeats tonelessly. "Are we talking private like, money? Or family drama? Or," as she suggests it, she realizes, "oh, you mean sex."

Cat doesn't answer for a long moment, just blushes darker. "Yeah."

Jade's brow furrows, "I'm sorry, are you the same Cat Valentine who was bragging about having sex with your girlfriend in the janitor's closet a couple of months ago?"

"Yes," Cat whispers.

"Okay, what changed?" Jade asks, turning toward her on the couch. "The sex is still good, isn't it?"

Cat looks offended. "Of course it is! It's incredible!"

Jade holds up her hands, "Hey, I don't doubt Sam's skill or your enthusiasm."

"What about *my* skill?" Cat challenges petulantly.

"That wasn't supposed to be a slight," Jade counters. "I hit a nerve, didn't I?"

"Yeah," Cat admits. "It's just—she's done more than I have, and she's tried some things on me, and I want to try them, too, but I...don't know how to tell her that. When I try, I get..." Cat gestures to her blushing face and stutters, "Like this."

"Gosh, I wonder what you could possibly be alluding to," Jade teases in a deadpan. Cat glares at her, a withering look that makes Jade laugh, though she's secretly impressed by it. "Alright, sorry. Look, I've never been where you are. Tori and I—" she stops herself, "Well, she'll kill me if I say much about that. But let's just say neither of us were as shy as you are."

"Rub it in, why don't you," Cat mumbles grouchy.

“But why do you have to actually say it to Sam?”

“Well, I can’t just put my face there with no warning!” Cat scoffs.

“Why not?”

“It’s not proper! It’s not polite!” she insists.

“It’s cunnilingus. I don’t think *polite* really factors in.”

“Well, what if I go to try it and she’s not in the mood and stops me? Then I’ll never want to do it again!”

“Pretty sure she’ll be in the mood for that.” But Jade figures people are varied and difficult to predict. How does she know how Sam really feels about oral sex, anyway? “But, okay, you still don’t have to actually say it.”

“Yes I—”

“I’m not saying just spring it on her. I’m saying, I don’t know, write her a note. Or text her or something. If you can’t get the words out of your mouth, let your fingers say it for you.” She pauses, considers the instructions she’s just laid out. “And then let your mouth take over what your fingers have been doing this whole time.”

“*Jade.*”

“What?”

But Cat seems to sit with it for a moment. “Jade, that’s—actually, that’s pretty smart.”

“Yeah, well,” Jade shrugs. “When you’ve dated a werewolf as long as I have, you get used to figuring out alternate ways to communicate.”

“I’m sure,” Cat winks.

Jade narrows her eyes. “I’m not sure what you’re insinuating, but I hate it.”

“Can we watch the movie now?” Cat asks.

“Gladly.”

She and Cat enjoy their evening together, and wake up early the next morning to go pick up Sam and Tori at the park just after dawn. This, too, follows their summer ritual—they go out for breakfast together, Jade and Cat watching Tori and Sam wolf down huge, meat-filled omelettes with extra sides of bacon while they eat more standard breakfasts (strawberry crepes for Cat, basic eggs and hashbrowns for Jade washed down with at least five cups of diner coffee).

After breakfast, they head their separate ways. Jade and Tori’s usual plan after a wolf night, when they can manage it, is a nap in Tori’s bedroom. At least the Vega house is usually pretty

low key in the mid to late morning. At least until Trina wakes up. Or arrives home. According to Tori, Trina seems to be *thriving* at Northridge College. Socially, at least. She still technically lives at home but spends a lot of nights with friends who live closer to the college. There's even a rumored boyfriend (Jade is disgusted at anyone who can tolerate that much Trina). But Trina still comes home reliably every weekend to do her laundry and raid the fridge. Which, of course, she can never do even remotely quietly.

Fortunately, Trina doesn't arrive back at home until almost noon, giving Jade and Tori a chance to rest together. They enjoy a lazy day at the Vega house, only venturing out to get some sushi before going right back into Tori's bedroom, and, as the evening turns to night, enjoying Tori's heightened libido that is still present just after the full moon ends.

Yeah, the full moon is absolutely Jade's favorite time of the month.

Despite guessing that perhaps Cat's sex life with Sam is becoming lackluster, Jade is definitely not experiencing the same thing with Tori. Sex with Tori is a world of difference from Jade's previous sex life with Beck. Which, given Beck had never actually been into her sexually, is definitely something that should have been obvious, but it had taken Jade by surprise, a little, to discover just how it felt to be appreciated by Tori. To be *objectified* by Tori, in a way Jade welcomed completely. She and Beck had been curious, sexually, but curiosity hadn't led to really any passion or sensuality. She and Tori had *tons* of that. Watching Tori fixate on her breasts, or the pleasure on her face when she touches Jade, or the victory in her eyes when she gets Jade off (not to mention the equally sexy reactions when Jade turns the tables on her), all make Jade feel gorgeous and desired and loved in a completely new way that is still growing between them. They're still discovering new things, at least when they have the privacy to do so.

Jade hopes that college isn't going to make this connection between them too difficult to maintain, because she values this time with Tori. Like she values her monthly opportunity to bond with Cat—and Sam, when she's a human—but like, obviously her relationship with Tori is far more important.

But Jade figures that maintaining her connections with old friends, not to mention her girlfriend, is probably about as much as she can handle with regard to friendship right now. She'll never say it aloud, because she doesn't want to sound like a reality show trope, but she's not in film school to make friends. If she finds people she can tolerate enough to work with, fine. But that's not friendship. That's business.

So she's a little surprised when a new friendship seems to emerge on the horizon.

A Friday evening a few weeks later, she and Tori are going to see a screening of a foreign film at UCLA together. Though seeing such screenings aren't *required* in Tori's classes, per se, it's strongly encouraged, and there's a similar policy in Jade's classes. They're making it something of a date night; Jade wears something a little extra low cut, spends time on her makeup in a way that she normally doesn't on a daily basis. They're planning on a late dinner after the movie to round out their evening, and then they plan to go to Jade's house to spend the night together, the start of the time they make sure to spend together every weekend.

Jade drives over to pick up Tori and finds that she, too, has put a little something extra into her appearance. She's wearing a blazer that Jade hasn't seen before, her hair has a little extra wave to it, her makeup is a little more defined than usual. It's cute, but so *Tori*. Who does she think she is, trying to make a blazer look sexy? And why is it working?

They chat amiably as Jade drives them across town to Tori's campus for the movie. It can be an annoying drive, but at least with the fact that they haven't really seen each other aside from video chat screens all week, it makes the trip more tolerable. They tell each other about school, the assignments and projects they're working on. Tori has mentioned a school friend she's found a couple of times, but hasn't really given Jade any details. Jade is glad for her that she has someone in her program who she likes, but she also kind of envies Tori's ability to just make a new friend, just like that. It had annoyed her when Tori started at Hollywood Arts and quickly became close to everyone in Jade's social circle, even earning the title of Cat's "other best friend," something that had been only Jade's designation before. Jade felt like she'd had to fight for the friendships she did manage (though she has to admit that, other than Cat, her other friendships were made through Beck, so...), and to have Tori swoop in and seem to be direct competition not just for acting roles, or singing parts, or the attention of Jade's boyfriend, but for her *friends*, too? It had been almost too much for Jade to handle.

Yet somehow, Tori's quest for friendship had explicitly included Jade, too, despite Jade's many attempts to dissuade her. And over time, Jade had grown to tolerate Tori more, even respect her at times, for her tenacity, her honesty, and her refusal to be intimidated by Jade. And then, just when their friendship had begun to find tentative footing, Beck and Jade had broken up, Beck had told Jade that he was gay, and Tori had told Jade that she was a werewolf, all of which had started them on this path toward each other, toward admitting feelings that both of them had tried to ignore for a while. And now, here they are, together for a year and a half, and being with Tori is still the closest Jade has ever been to happy.

Okay, she's *actually* happy, but admitting that goes against her image. But she knows, and Tori knows, and that's enough for Jade.

Jade imagines the envious eyes on her as she walks into the theater with Tori on her arm. Though, maybe she should assume the eyes are on her own cleavage. They can still be envious, then. It just feels nice to be on a date together. This is the first time since classes started that they've gone out together like this. Jade wonders if any of Tori's classmates are having their hopes and dreams of asking Tori out crushed by the revelation that Tori is *hers*. Jade wraps her arm a little tighter around Tori's waist at the thought.

It doesn't really seem like any of Tori's classmates are there, though. At least, she's not speaking to anyone in the lobby waiting to be let into the theater. Until. "Carly!" Tori exclaims in surprise.

Jade turns to see a young woman she definitely recognizes. She'd never been that into *iCarly* herself, but Beck used to watch it on occasion, though he fairly quickly stopped doing it around Jade when she'd accused him of only watching it to stare at the pretty girls on the webshow. In retrospect, that clearly hadn't been the draw for him, and now Jade finds herself wondering if he'd watched hoping to catch a glimpse of Freddie, because if Robbie is any

indication, Beck's type is decidedly nerdy. Though even Jade has to admit that Freddie is pretty cute, for a nerd.

But this isn't Freddie Benson, who Jade has already had an unexpected meeting with in Los Angeles. This is Carly Shay.

"Hey!" Carly greets Tori with a smile, "Good to see you!"

"I didn't know you were coming to this! You didn't seem all that interested when I told you."

Carly shrugs. "Well, after living in Italy for a year, I kind of thought I'd had my fill of foreign language films for a while, because they dub *everything*, but the more I thought about it, the more it sounded fun. And since I didn't have other plans—because, uh, they fell through, I thought I'd come see a movie." Jade has a sense that Carly's other plans "falling through" isn't exactly true, but she isn't going to call her on it.

"I'm glad you came out! It's good to see you outside of class," Tori gushes.

"You, too," Carly replies, her eyes darting briefly over to Jade. "Though I didn't realize you were bringing a friend with you. I hope I'm not intruding on anything."

Tori chuckles a little self-consciously and side-steps the awkward moment by saying, "Carly, this is my girlfriend Jade."

"Oh!" Carly's eyes flash briefly, and her smile widens. Jade can't tell if it's a genuinely pleased reaction to the news, or the kind of forced cheer that straight people put on to try to show that they're total allies who don't have any issue with you being queer, they promise.

"Jade, this is Carly Shay."

"I know who she is," Jade interrupts. It's an automatic response, almost defensive, the kind of knee-jerk reaction that sometimes happens when Jade feels like someone is telling her something they should know that she already knows. But it's also not exactly the most gracious response to an introduction to someone, especially given that Jade isn't exactly a fangirl. There's nothing wrong with Carly, at all, she seems funny and she's certainly attractive, but Jade doesn't want to give the impression that she's watched every episode of *iCarly* or anything like that. So she gives Carly a deliberate nod, and offers in a more pleasant to neutral tone, "It's nice to meet you."

Briefly, Jade wonders why Sam hasn't mentioned that Carly is going to school in Los Angeles, but she's also astute enough to realize that mentioning Sam isn't the best course to take right now. If Sam hasn't mentioned Carly, and if Tori hasn't mentioned Sam, there must be a good reason. And honestly, now that she thinks about it, in all the time she's known Sam, Sam has barely mentioned Carly at all, in general.

Huh. Jade wonders why she's never really thought about this before. Maybe her misanthropic tendencies have caused her to miss out on some interpersonal shit that her nosy side is now dying to know.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Carly replies warmly. Like Tori, she’s almost friendly to a fault, not even acknowledging Jade’s protestation that an introduction to Carly was unnecessary. “Well, I’ll leave you two to your date.”

“You can sit with us if you want,” Jade offers. It’s mostly a gesture for Tori, because she saw how happy Tori had been to see her, and now she’s putting the pieces together and realizing that Carly must be Tori’s new school friend that she’s been chattering about over the past couple of weeks.

Carly looks surprised. “Really?”

“Sure,” Jade answers evenly. “We’re not going to be doing anything but sitting quietly in a dark theater with our eyes on the screen, so why shouldn’t you sit next to us?”

“Jade’s very serious about theater etiquette,” Tori supplies.

“Everyone in here should be,” Jade retorts. “And if they’re not, I’m issuing a formal complaint to the department head of your program.”

“You won’t have to do that,” Tori soothes. “I’m sure this is going to be a well-behaved audience.”

They file into the theater once the doors open, with Tori sitting between Jade and Carly. The only thing that kind of sucks about seeing movies on college campuses is that there are rarely any concessions, or at least not any that are that great. The good part is that it’s cheap. Tori and Carly get in for free with their student IDs, and Jade’s student ID for a different school gets her a discounted rate, so she only has to pay a couple of bucks to see the movie.

And the movie is fine. It isn’t Jade’s favorite thing that she’s seen recently, but she enjoys it overall. Though as usual, Jade finds herself a bit of a stronger critic than her moviegoing companions, because Tori and Carly exit the theater gushing about it together.

They’re not excluding Jade, who certainly expresses her own opinion, which the other two consider and either acknowledge or sometimes counter, but as they stand outside the theater chatting, Jade is torn between wanting to continue to discuss the movie further, and being hungry.

She could just prompt Tori to leave with her. But she can tell that Tori is enjoying chatting with Carly. And, truthfully, Jade is kind of enjoying talking to Carly, too. Even if they don’t agree on much, talking about film is often more interesting with more people. Something she’s learning is that everyone sees something different in a film, even if most of the time, they’re wrong. And though Carly didn’t go to Hollywood Arts, she’s clearly someone who has experience in front of a camera, and enough interest to pursue some part of a media and performance related field (Jade isn’t sure which part of the UCLA Film, Television & Theater program Carly is interested in).

And, okay, maybe part of this is driven by the nosy side of Jade. The side who wonders why the subject of Sam seems to be taboo around Carly, and the subject of Carly is one that Sam has avoided entirely.



When there's enough of a break in the conversation, Jade asks if she can talk to Tori alone for a moment and they step away enough to have a private conversation. "I want to go get dinner," Jade starts.

"I know," Tori sighs. "I'm hungry, too, I was just enjoying the conversation. I'll say goodbye."

"If you would let me finish," Jade replies, a tad sharply. "I was going to suggest that we just get dinner with Carly. Because I want to keep talking about the film, too."

"Really?" Tori asks.

"If you're okay with that." She searches Tori's face, which looks conflicted. "I know we planned on a date night, but I'm having a really good time with you, and it's kind of cool to get to know Carly. And as long as you don't invite her back to my bedroom after dinner...I think we can still end 'date night' really well." She quirks an eyebrow.

Tori's face shifts into a smirk. "So that's all it takes to count as a date night to you? Sex?"

"Hey, we watched a movie and we're going to eat together. I don't see how that's not a date."

Tori laughs. "I'm alright with it if you're sure you're alright with it."

"I wouldn't have suggested it if I weren't."

"That's true," Tori acknowledges. "But," she drops her voice and pulls out her PearPhone, "I need to text you something important first."

Seconds later, Jade gets a text that says.

### **Don't mention Sam**

Well, now her curiosity is *fully* piqued.

Tori hurries back over to Carly, "Hey, so, we were going to go get dinner. You want to come with us?"

Carly looks even more surprised. "Are you sure you want me to keep crashing your date?" she asks incredulously.

"It's not crashing if we invite you," Jade drawls. "It's just that we're both enjoying talking with you about the movie but if I don't eat something soon I might get violent."

"You sound like my best friend," Carly laughs, but there's an awkwardness to the sound and she quickly follows up with, "But sure! I'd love to get something to eat. I'm still new around here, do you two know someplace good?"

They get Mexican food at a little place not far from campus, Jade driving all three of them for simplicity's sake. And it's a good time. It's not exactly a romantic atmosphere, anyway, but the food is good, and that's about all that matters to Jade. Once they've exhausted conversation about the movie, they veer onto other topics, and Jade starts to pick up a few things about Carly.

Such as when she mentions, "You know, having my own place has been kind of great, it's the first time I've been on my own in my life. And don't get me wrong, it's a *tiny* apartment, and my dad is helping me pay for it, but...it's also kind of lonely. Most of my neighbors are much older. I haven't really talked to any of them except the one lady whose dog really likes me. Sometimes I second-guess my decision not to live on campus."

Tori replies, "Yeah, my friend Andre is living on campus at our school and I think he's having a blast. But, I don't know. My family can be annoying, but at least I know what to expect, living with them."

"Wait, I think there's an Andre in my World History class. Braids, really cute?" Carly asks.

Tori laughs, "I think Andre has World History on Tuesdays and Thursdays." Carly nods confirmation, and Tori scrunches her face up adorably. "It's probably him. I don't know, it feels weird to call him cute, he's like my brother."

"That plus you're *so* gay," Jade teases.

"Hey!" Tori draws herself up indignantly. "That's...true," she deflates with a chuckle. "But that doesn't mean I can't tell when a guy is attractive!"

"Well, Andre is," Jade confirms, nodding to Carly.

"Maybe I'll introduce myself," Carly muses. "Especially since I know you."

Tori glances at Jade swiftly, pointedly, and it takes Jade a second to realize that they'll probably have to tell Andre not to mention Sam. Geez, what is with all this secrecy? But then Tori says amiably, "Andre's a great guy. I highly recommend him as a friend."

"What if Carly wants more than a friend?" Jade asks keenly, eyeing her.

Carly blushes a little. "Hey, I wouldn't be opposed, necessarily. I don't really think I need to be dating right now, though."

"That's fair," Jade subsides, relenting from the prying.

"I guess I'm more interested in finding friends right now," Carly continues, "since I left behind everyone I know. I just want to find other people who are...like me."

Jade raises her eyebrows at this vague pronouncement. Tori encouragingly says, "Well, it seems like people in our program are a good place to start."

"Yeah," Carly says uncertainly. "I don't know. I so far haven't really found anybody else that I feel like I can approach other than you. I'm just glad we overlap in a few areas."

“Oh?” Tori responds curiously.

“Yeah. We’re all into film media and we’re all queer.” Oh, *that’s* interesting. Jade tilts her head curiously as Carly smiles shyly. “I’m bi,” she tells them.

“Interesting,” Jade comments under her breath.

But Carly must’ve heard it, because she glances up. “Is it?” she asks.

Jade isn’t sure what to say, so she just says, “Sure. It’s nice to have another bisexual around.” It’s not at all what she’s thinking, but it’s the first thing she can think of.

“It is,” Carly agrees with a smile, then glances at Tori. “Not that—you’re great, too!”

Tori laughs. “Don’t worry, I’m not feeling left out. I can just go talk to Sa, uh, Sandra when I need to talk to another lesbian. Yeah. My friend Sandra.”

Jade nearly facepalms, but keeps herself stoic while Tori falters. “Good old Sandra,” she drawls.

Carly looks a little confused, like she knows something is weird here, but the waiter interrupts them to take their plates, and it seems to smooth over the moment. And then they’re figuring out how to split the check and heading out, so the conversation halts entirely, and the ride home is just simple chatter between Carly’s directions to her nearby apartment.

“Thanks for the ride,” she says to Jade as she waves, “I’ll see you Monday, Tori!”

“Bye, Carly! Thanks for hanging out with us!” Tori waves. They watch to make sure she gets into her building, then Jade starts to drive away. “That was fun,” Tori comments happily.

“Yeah, especially the part where you almost mentioned Sam,” Jade snarks.

Tori groans, “I can’t believe that happened. I was being so careful!”

“Okay, but what is the deal with Sam and Carly? Why are they secrets from each other?”

“Well,” Tori shifts uncomfortably, “It’s not really that Carly is a secret from Sam. I talked to Sam about how I met her in class and was starting to befriend her, and Sam is alright with it, she just doesn’t want Carly in her life—”

“Okay, but *why*?” Jade presses. “Look, I didn’t watch much of their webshow, but even I know they were best friends. What happened?”

Tori takes a deep breath. “I feel weird telling you.”

Jade bristles, a little. There’s part of her that still defaults to earlier assumptions about how relationships should work, the kinds of beliefs that had led to so many fights when she’d dated Beck. The idea that partners shouldn’t have secrets between them, that they should share everything. In reality, Jade knows there can still be independent friendships that have connections outside of relationships. For instance, she hasn’t mentioned anything to Tori

about the conversation she had with Cat about sex, because she doesn't think it's any of Tori's business. Maybe whatever Sam shared with Tori is like this.

And abruptly, all the pieces come together for Jade. "Ohhh, I get it. Sam and Carly were more than best friends, weren't they?"

Tori nods mutely. Jade can see it out of the corner of her eye, and then Tori says briskly, "I guess I didn't have to spill anything."

"Nope. So wait. Sam knows about Carly, but Carly doesn't know you know Sam?"

"Right," Tori nods. "It just seems...simpler that way."

"Simpler for who?" Jade asks. Maybe she's still a little stung from her knee-jerk reaction to Tori keeping a secret from her, but this feels sketchy. She remembers something else. "If you already knew that Carly and Sam dated, then you knew she was queer already. What else do you know about Carly that she hasn't told you?"

Tori sighs. "I know that she's a werewolf," she says quietly.

"*Tori*. And she doesn't know you're one?"

"No," Tori replies quietly.

There's silence for a moment. "Don't you see how weird this is?" Jade challenges.

"I hadn't really thought about it," Tori insists, sounding distraught. "I thought I was just keeping Sam's privacy and that I could just get to know Carly organically."

"Okay, but given what almost happened tonight, at some point she's going to realize that you're close with Sam."

"You're right," Tori slumps into her seat. "I have to figure out what to do about this."

"Pretty sure you need to talk to Carly," Jade supplies.

"I think I need to talk to Sam, too."

"Did Sam *ask* you not to tell Carly you knew her?"

Tori pauses. "No. Not in so many words. She just...doesn't want to talk to Carly, so I thought just...not even letting Carly know would be the best way..." she trails off.

"Yeah, not so much," Jade grumbles succinctly.

"I know that *now*," Tori sighs heavily. "This was all so much simpler when I thought I was the only werewolf around here."

Jade laughs. "This isn't werewolf drama. This is plain old relationship drama."

"I guess you're right. My track record isn't great with that either."

“Yeah. Let’s see. You kissed my gay boyfriend just to annoy me. You kissed Cat’s boyfriend who used to be your boyfriend just to, I don’t know, feel something?”

“Something like that,” Tori admits hollowly. “Don’t remind me.” But then she laughs briefly. “At least Carly and I already shared a boyfriend without knowing it so we already moved past that.”

“A boyfriend only one of you was actually into,” Jade smirks.

“Hey! I was still figuring myself out at that age!”

“And you’re still figuring yourself out now. At least in terms of friendships.”

Tori narrows her eyes at her. “How are you lecturing me about friendship? You hate everyone.”

“Not everyone. But that’s why. You *like* everyone. Makes it hard to disappoint anyone.”

Tori is quiet for a moment. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

Jade pats her thigh affectionately. “Good thing I’m here to set you straight. You’re lucky I’m so smart.”

Tori scowls adorably. “You’ve just had more *life experience*,” she shoots back, and her tone makes it clear it’s entirely a jab. But she quickly follows it up with. “Good thing I like older women.”

“Let’s just get back to my house and then I’ll put my *life experience* to work.”

“When I’m done with you, you won’t even be able to remember those *life experiences*,” Tori purrs.

There’s a minor jolt in Jade’s stomach at the promise, but then, she starts laughing. Tori joins in and Jade controls her laughter so she can keep focused on the road. “You’re such an idiot,” she says affectionately to Tori.

“I love you, too,” Tori replies without missing a beat. “Now come on and get us home, I have a hot girlfriend to sex up.”

“Won’t she be disappointed to see you brought me,” Jade quips, prompting Tori to poke her in retaliation.

-

It’s an acknowledged thing, that Sam’s libido gets higher around the full moon. It seems to be just a werewolf thing in general, since Jade and Tori have also referenced it. Thankfully, it doesn’t seem like Sam’s libido craters during the new moon, at least not that Cat has noticed.

Cat has been sitting on Jade’s advice to just write Sam a note or text her or *something* for almost a month now, long enough that the next full moon is almost upon them. It’s only

partially because she's been steeling her nerves. It's mostly because they've been busy. In the past few weeks, Cat had her first couple of tests in her classes and Sam had her first few major art projects due. They certainly haven't been *celibate*, but it had been easier to default to their most established sexual routine, which tends to vary based on how horny Sam is. When she's amped, she's often in control, and tends to pour all her energy into getting Cat off, often achieving orgasm herself in the process. When she's at her more stable baseline of regular horny, it's a little more egalitarian, a little more give and take.

So, Cat realizes that near the full moon might not be the ideal time to explore something new. But she's also reached the point when she's tired of putting it off. The weight of *not* having done it yet is pulling at her, tugging her down, making her feel frustrated during everyday interactions, not just with Sam, but just in general in her life.

Cat wonders again, briefly, if the moon affects her in similar ways as it does Sam, considering the way this particular desire seems to have waxed and waned so powerfully over the last month or so.

On Saturday, they have a rare moment apart, as Cat goes to Elderly Acres to spend some time with Nona and Sam agrees to go to the gym with Goomer to help him train, at Dice's request. The time Sam almost became a professional MMA fighter herself last spring means Dice actually trusts her to train Goomer instead of worrying about someone else giving him the "wrong" training, and Sam is willing to help out. For a price, anyway.

Cat has a nice lunch with Nona, but by the time they're finished eating, conversation devolves into Nona reminiscing about old stories to the point that Cat has to pretend she might have left the stove on at the apartment to have an excuse to hurry home. Of course, she'd done no such thing, though she'd even started to convince even herself as she'd rushed home.

Once Cat sees that no stove burner was left on and feels better, she realizes that since she's arrived home before Sam, she has an opportunity.

She sends Sam a text.

**I want to try something new with you tonight**



There isn't a forthcoming reply. Cat assumes Sam must be pretty busy training Goomer. She halfheartedly considers homework that she has to do this weekend, pokes her head in the fridge to begin to make a plan for dinner.

Not five minutes later, she hears the roar of a motorcycle coming to a stop just behind their apartment, and looks out the kitchen window to see Sam hurriedly parking her bike on the patio. Seconds later, she bursts through the back door, almost taking it off its hinges.

“Hi,” she breathes, while Cat stands next to the kitchen sink and stares at her, taking in her wild hair, the way her chest rises with her breaths, the blush over her face, her eyes, bright and stunning like sunlight shining through beach glass.

“You’re home already,” Cat replies. Her stomach leaps at the implication, the realization, that what she thought might be an activity for later, might become one for *now*.

“Rushed home as soon as I got that text,” Sam admits.

Cat’s eyes widen. “Did you speed? Were you *safe*?”

“Not really,” Sam laughs softly.

Cat sets her jaw unhappily, glaring at Sam. “That isn’t funny.”

Sam spreads her hands. “Can you blame me? After you sent a text like *that*?”

“Yes,” Cat insists, with finality. “You need to be careful! Because I can’t...do what I’m planning to do...if you’re in the hospital!”

Sam grins. “I mean, you *could*.”

“Sam!” Cat isn’t relenting her anger.

“Sorry.” Sam shoves her hands into the pockets of her jeans, looking contrite. “Guess I thought you’d understand that I get a bit reckless when it comes to you.”

Something in Cat melts at the statement, even though she’s still horrified at Sam’s willingness to put herself in danger so cavalierly. Finally, she replies softly, “You’re too special for me to want to let you be reckless.”

Sam moves a little closer, hearing the way Cat’s voice has changed, the invitation in her tone. “Tell you what,” she murmurs, leaning close, “You forgive me...and I’ll be as careful as you want me to be.” She murmurs the last few words against Cat’s lips before kissing her.

It makes Cat’s heart hammer against her ribs for a moment as she wraps her arms around Sam and tugs her closer. Eventually, though, she forces herself to pull back so she can reply. “Right now, it’s my turn to get a little reckless.”

Sam’s eyes flash. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” Cat confirms. She kisses Sam again, swiftly. “Meet me in my bed.”

Sam turns immediately and starts hurrying down the hall toward the bedroom, while Cat watches her, feeling a leap in her stomach, eager, but nervous. She *still* hasn’t actually voiced exactly what she wants to do, but it’s clear they both know, and it’s clear Sam is excited. Cat hopes she’ll be able to follow through.

Jade’s advice had worked. Or, well, it’s working so far, if Cat continues on the path. She silently thanks Jade while she takes her time following Sam to the bedroom.

But Jade is quickly far from Cat's mind as she kisses Sam, and kissing leads to clothes being discarded, which leads to Sam whimpering as Cat's lips trace along her jawline, fingers moving to unbutton her pants.

When Cat gets Sam out of all her clothes, she's still mostly dressed, having only removed her shoes and cardigan. She likes the way it feels, for Sam to be nude in front of her, all her secret softnesses laid bare, and for Cat to be here with her, her own body covered, obfuscated, mentally set aside.

But apparently not for Sam, who eyes her with something like desperation in her expression. "You're not naked."

"Because this isn't about me," Cat replies softly, scanning Sam's body. "Lie down on my bed."

Sam's eyes widen. "When did you get so demanding?"

"I just know what I want," Cat answers, climbing onto the bed after Sam, knees settling onto the mattress between Sam's thighs.

As they kiss on the bed, and Cat takes her time, building her own courage, listening for Sam's needy breaths and whiny whimpers, Sam manages to coax her out of a few more clothes, but Cat still feels her undergarments like armor, pieces that make her look alluring but that keep Sam from being able to distract her, to take the power away from her. Well, Sam absolutely could if she really wanted to. And from the way her fingertips tease at the edges of the fabric of Cat's remaining clothes, it seems clear that Sam *does* want to. But she trembles as she controls herself.

Cat remembers how close they are to the full moon, how much Sam must be holding back, as Cat has her on her back, only able to accept the attention Cat wants to give her, waiting for something Sam has longed for.

She smiles down at Sam, gracious, loving. "After I'm done with you," she promises, "You can get as rough with me as you need to."

Sam flushes dark, eyes seeming to blaze with heat, blue like the heart of a flame. "You can't say that to me right now," she husks.

"Too late," Cat says airily. She has no fear of Sam's wild side, no fear of the lunges that only lead to licks, never bites. She knows that, ultimately, even under the light of the full moon, as long as she's human formed, it's always Sam who has control, even if sometimes her control is strained, just waiting for the chance to let the wolf out of its cage.

Sam breathes out a curse as Cat settles onto her stomach on the mattress. There's barely enough room for them both on the little twin bed, but they shift around until they find what works. Cat presses gentle kisses all over the flesh surrounding her goal until finally, she meets Sam's eye as she stares down her body at Cat, offers a wink, and then closes her eyes, the potency of eye contact too intense, too severe, and she wants to block out the feeling of being observed as she lets her mouth meet tender flesh.



And it's...it's heady, it makes Cat whimper to feel herself in such a position, to be the source of such pleasure from her lips, to feel so acutely the way Sam quivers, to hear the note of awe in her moan, the way she breathes out Cat's name.

Cat takes a deep breath, letting the moment crystalize, feeling swollen with all the emotions churning through her, love and power and desire and an edge of fear, a twinge of anxiety, as she embarks on something new and sexy and deeply meaningful, making love to Sam with her mouth, the most intimate connection Cat can imagine, the most significant act she thinks she can offer Sam, erotically.

Cat has never been more sure about anything as how much she wants to do this. And how much she hopes she'll be good at it. Like Sam is.

She pours love from her lips, flooding into Sam, trembling with the sheer eroticism of the moment, of feeling both like she has all the control and absolutely none of it, as she struggles to focus on the movements of her tongue, her lips, senses engulfed in all things Sam.

When it barely takes any time at all for Sam to come, Cat doubts it has anything to do with her technique, and everything to do with the emotional weight of it all, the potency of a first time, the exaggerated pleasure of delayed gratification, as Cat reciprocates an act of love bestowed on her months ago.

It seems to take a long time before Sam is able to speak as she clutches Cat close to her. Cat nuzzles her neck, lips still performing acts of love, this time in the form of little kisses and whispered words, until finally, Sam seems to come back to herself, catches her breath, rasping her own utterances of love in return.

Before she flips them. And Cat feels the jolt in her stomach as the creature before her awakens, and the weight of Sam, though barely more than her own, seems to pin Cat in place on the bed, and there's nothing Cat can do but hang on as Sam's entire body seeks to find new locales and methods of giving Cat pleasure, the thrill of being overtaken and even pangs of pain inherent in Sam's ferocity only adding to Cat's erotic enjoyment until she's built up to her peak and Sam guides her into her fall, Cat feeling like she's going to careen into pleasure until she crashes hard, but she welcomes it, the ruthlessness of sex and sensuality matched as fiercely as the love of Sam that brings her back to herself.

Cat floats, as if in a hazy dream, for long moments after her orgasm, encircled in Sam's arms, breathing in her scent, but as she begins to come back to herself, there's a void in her chest, a chasm of doubt, that grows wider, and Cat is abruptly crying, plagued with a phantom sense of sadness and loss that she can't make sense of.

Sam tugs her closer, nuzzles her cheek, kisses her temple. "Hey, it's okay," she murmurs in a voice hoarse like the growls of a wolf, but it's clear from her tone that she thinks this is the kind of crying that occasionally happens when someone is overcome with joy from really intense sex, that she has no idea Cat is sad.

Cat twists a little in her arms, trying to turn away from her to get control over herself, but her action seems to make Sam aware of the issue as she shifts, trying to get a look at Cat's face.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, voice tinged with pain and worry. “Was I...was it too much? I’m so sorry.”

Cat shakes her head quickly, because even if she’s still formulating her feelings, she knows it doesn’t have anything to do with Sam, with how ferociously she loves Cat with her whole body as the moon grows fuller. Cat means it when she says she likes Sam to be rough with her. She loves the sensations, the protection of their trust, the feeling like she’s at Sam’s mercy. She also knows that she’s upset with herself right now.

“Then what happened?” Sam asks, sounding baffled.

Cat takes a breath, still trying to figure that out, and starts speaking as her thoughts coalesce. “I don’t know,” she whispers. “I think I just don’t know what I can offer you anymore.”

“What?” Sam asks, the single syllable brimming with confusion and worry and frustration and anguish.

Cat begins to recognize the source of her despair, the sense of loss she’s feeling at the culmination of so many months of waiting, the rite of passage of another first passing between them, another piece of her own virginity slipped inside of Sam’s flesh. Cat can’t help but think of lovemaking in that way, as if she’s giving a piece of herself to Sam each time, and taking a piece of Sam with her, as though they’ve knit themselves together, body and soul, and how each new experience tugs them closer, but also marks Cat, changes her in some significant way.

She can’t make sense of why this particular act is hitting her in this way, but she feels both the acute loss of something ethereal, some shred of innocence that perhaps had only existed as a technicality, and she feels the emptiness inside as she realizes that with this act, she has no idea if there’s anything left she can give of herself to Sam. Have they explored everything together now? What is left to keep Sam interested, excited about her?

*What if she has made the wrong choice and given all of herself to Sam and Sam isn’t who she’s meant to be with?*

“Cat, what do you mean?” Sam prompts again, voice sounding more urgent.

Cat lets herself weep for just a moment, trying to find places for these doubts, to tuck them away in her mind so that they no longer bother her, but finally she says, “I’m scared you won’t want to be with me now that...we don’t have more to explore together.”

“I’ll *always* want to be with you,” Sam replies, so swiftly and naturally that it can only be genuine, and then she seems to process what Cat actually said. “What do you mean we don’t have more to explore?”

“I just mean...” Cat trails off. “You’re not...waiting for me to do something new anymore.”

“You think I’m going to get bored with you because you’ve started going down on me?” Sam asks incredulously.

Just hearing Sam's perspective is enough to break through some of Cat's ruminations. She grins in spite of herself. "I guess it's still good even when it's not the first time."

"Uh, *yeah*," Sam replies emphatically, "All of it is. What makes you worry I'd ever get bored of making love to you?"

"I...don't know." She's never really talked about her conflicted thoughts about sex with Sam. She's never really talked about it with *anyone*. "I guess sometimes it's hard to not see... things like this as...a loss instead of gaining a new experience."

"A loss?" Sam repeats, so blandly and bluntly that Cat knows she doesn't understand this whatsoever.

Cat attempts to explain, her thoughts still scattered, her mind still half in the chasm of loss, half on a bridge bringing her closer to Sam, like a bandage healing the wound of her anguish. She finally turns to look at Sam, hoping that she'll be able to finally explain this. "You've done this before," she states.

"Yeah," Sam drawls slowly, tone inviting Cat to elaborate.

"This was the first time I've done that. With anyone."

Sam's lip twitches in a smile even though her brows are still drawn in concern. "Yeah. I know. And that's really special to me."

"It's special to me, too," Cat replies, "So special that...sometimes it feels like giving away something of myself that can never be recovered."

They're both quiet for a moment, then Sam asks, "Are you talking about, like...virginity?"

Cat nods. "That's the framework I was brought up with. To think of sex like something that *takes* from you. Something that can *taint* you."

"Yeah, I've heard of stuff like that," Sam replies quietly, eyes dropping almost guiltily.

"It never *feels* like that, though," Cat insists, coaxing Sam to look at her again. "I'm just still trying to learn to think about sex as something I *get* things from, instead of something I *lose* things to. Like new experiences. Feeling close to you. Feeling loved by you."

Sam smiles ruefully. "I guess I never really thought of your virginity as something I...owned. I wanted to be careful with you because of it, but because it was new to you. Not because I felt like I was taking anything from you."

"Sometimes it scares me that it's not something that's mine anymore," Cat whispers, her own eyes dropping now. "I'm still trying to work through some of that."

Even though she's not looking directly at her anymore, she can see the way Sam tilts her head curiously. "Why should it matter if you're not a virgin if you've gained all these wonderful things from having sex with someone you love?"

“Well, it’s fine when I know you’re who I’m going to spend my life with,” Cat replies, almost flippant, “But then I worry...what if you leave me?”

“I *won’t*,” Sam insists. But then she asks a question, “You’re worried about being wrong about me? Giving your virginity to someone you won’t be with for the rest of your life?”

“Sometimes,” Cat admits. It’s a little bit of a lie. It’s a simmering fear, almost always on the back burner. Not because of anything Sam does, just because despite the fact that she’s a dreamer, Cat knows how unlikely it is to stay with a high school sweetheart for the rest of her life.

“Well,” Sam says, her voice shifting into something approximating neutrality, like she’s making an announcement. “I did that. I had sex with someone who left me and broke my heart.”

“That’s true,” Cat concedes. It’s not news, of course, but Cat hadn’t really thought about it this way before. Mostly because Sam’s virginity has never been something for her to consider, since it has never been hers.

“But you know what?” Sam continues, “I don’t regret any of it. Because I loved her, and it was what was right for us at the time.”

“And there’s a part of you that will always love her,” Cat states, recalling something Sam said, months ago.

“Yeah,” Sam admits, her voice just slightly wistful. “But that would be true even if we’d never had our first time together. Virginity isn’t anything that special. It’s not the only key to your heart or the only way to love someone. It’s just one of them.”

“I know that,” Cat replies. “It’s like, I know it’s silly, but I also know that...virginity *is* special, at the same time. And that I want to be special to you.”

“You are. You always will be. No matter how much of a virgin you’re not.”

“I love you,” Cat nuzzles closer to her. “And I love that I gave you my virginity, at the same time that I hate that it feels like something I had to give away at all.”

“I can understand that.”

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The next day is Sunday, and it’s usually a day spent doing homework, by pretty much everyone Sam knows, including herself. One difference, however, is that some of Sam’s homework is art, which means that if not for the fact that it has a deadline, it’s almost fun.

It also means that Sam sometimes needs subjects for her art projects. And she’s encouraged to use multiple subjects. And she’s already used Cat.

So basically, this means that Tori and Jade are coming over for a homework day, and Sam will draw them while Cat works on homework. Sam is going to make an effort to work on

them one at a time, except for when she's specifically drawing where they overlap (including overlapping figures in this project is one of its requirements), so that they each have time to work on their own homework, and as a thank you, she's planning to provide them with dinner. Well, she's planning to have Cat make them dinner, anyway.

It turns out to be pretty straightforward. Tori and Jade arrive after lunch, Sam poses them on the couch, leaning toward each other, so that there's some interesting overlap with the way their legs cross into each other's and Tori's arm lays along the back of the couch behind Jade. Unlike the models in Sam's art class, Tori and Jade aren't nude (Sam had suggested it but Tori had refused with a blush), but they are wearing tank tops and shorts to give Sam less fabric to have to work around as she sketches them out.

She has them switch out once she has their basic forms on paper so that she can begin to work on the details. Time passes quickly. It's not just because Sam knows they're doing her a favor and she doesn't want to take up too much of their time, it's also because she's in the flow of her art, her motions feel almost automatic as she adds strokes to her paper with her graphite pencil, the process of translating their shapes to the page begins to feel automatic, if not effortless. That becomes clear every time she has to take a break to switch out models and she realizes how exhausting her focus is.

Although Cat is supposed to be working on her own homework, she's somehow always there with another root beer for Sam or another cup of coffee for Jade. Sam is still thinking about last night, when she has moments to think amidst pouring her attention into her art. She remembers the delight of experiencing something new with Cat, then holding her while she cried about it and tried to explain the way that everything always felt great to her, and meaningful, but it also sometimes left her feeling empty. Sam hates that Cat ever feels this way with her and wishes she could help her but she literally doesn't know how to make sense of Cat's feelings, Cat's reverence and longing for the virginity she'd lost, Cat's fear that despite all the pleasure and connection sex was building between them now, that some future event—that Sam is going to make sure *never* happens—could render all of it worthless, and make Cat feel the same way.

It just doesn't make sense. Or, it does, in that Sam has heard of people, especially women, who value virginity in a certain way. But as cautious as Cat had been about intimacy, Sam didn't think she'd been wrestling with anything like that. She'd *bragged* about their sex to her friends when they'd started having it!

Virginity just hadn't been something that important to Sam, at least, not the way it was to Cat. Sure, she understood the first time she'd had sex that it was very significant, but it didn't feel like a loss. Nor did it feel like a burden, which, Sam had known girls who talked about it that way, too. She and Carly had kind of approached it the same way—they were ready for their first time, they wanted it to bring them closer together, and they were willing to be in the moment together. Sam hadn't expected it to be particularly transformative, but apparently Carly kind of had, because Sam remembers that she'd mentioned when it was over that she was surprised that she still felt like the same old Carly. Albeit the same old Carly who couldn't stop grinning as she lounged in Sam's arms in a post-orgasmic stupor. But she'd seemed to have moved past that notion that she should be "different" rather quickly. Probably

by the time they'd had sex again and she was a lot less nervous about it. That was certainly a way she'd changed.

Maybe it isn't fair to compare her own loss of virginity (not to mention her ex-girlfriend's) to Cat's. Sam knows it's a natural comparison to make, but thinking about Carly doesn't do either of them any good. She brushes the thoughts aside as she applies hairspray to her finished drawing so the graphite won't smear before she can turn it in.

But apparently, the universe isn't done having her think about Carly.

While Cat goes into the kitchen to start dinner, and Jade follows her to brew some more coffee, Tori approaches Sam, asking if she can help her clean up.

There isn't a whole lot to do, but Sam shrugs. "Sure, I guess. Can you carry my easel back to the bedroom for me?"

Tori follows her back there as Sam takes her art supplies over to her side of the bedroom, stashing them under her bed and in her dresser. Tori watches, waiting to be told where to put the easel down, but once Sam indicates where it goes, Tori lingers. "I actually need to talk to you."

Sam pauses, cocking her head to look at Tori. "Okay. Then talk."

Tori takes a breath. Sam notices the way her fingers tangle together. Then she says, "I need to tell Carly that I know you."

Sam doesn't really know how to react at first. She draws a breath. "I take it that means that you two...are getting pretty friendly."

Tori nods. "And it's getting weird. Jade met her last night and she has a class with Andre and it feels like it's just going to come out eventually anyway and then I will just have lied to her for over a month and that's no way to build a friendship. And it's weird that I know things about her, from knowing you. It's starting to feel like I'm keeping you a secret. And that just—it's not working. It's not fair to Carly."

Sam had only wanted to protect her privacy, keep her boundaries. She didn't think it would be difficult or complicated for them each to have an independent friendship with Tori and for them to never overlap. But as Tori explains, she begins to realize...*she* knows that Tori knows Carly, and it still isn't forcing a connection. If Carly tries to leverage Tori to get to Sam...that would be on Carly, not Tori. "Okay."

"Okay?"

Sam shrugs. "I get it. I didn't really think about it. But it's only fair. I thought that you not mentioning me would be easy, but I guess it's not really fair that I know stuff about Carly, just from the little you've told me, and she doesn't know anything about me. Including who my friends are."

“I think so, too,” Tori replies. “And it’s also, she doesn’t know that I’m a werewolf, too. But I know she’s one. And that doesn’t seem right, either. You know what it was like to move here and not know how to find places to run around, how to get wolfsbane. Maybe she needs help, too.”

“That’s true, too.” Sam doesn’t want her own issues to prevent Carly from living comfortably as a werewolf in a big city. She knows from experience that there are only so many full moons a wolf can spend cooped up in an apartment without going wild.

“I can, you know, tell her anything you want me to about this. Or I can tell her nothing. I mean, I don’t want to be a liaison between you two forever, but if you need me to...” Tori trails off.

Sam considers where she wants her boundary to be with Carly, now that the two of them have a connection. “I guess just...I don’t know. I’m not ready to talk to her. I guess you can tell her that if she asks.”

The reality is, Tori building a friendship with Carly is already having an effect on Sam, even if she hasn’t seen or spoken to Carly herself yet. Just the knowledge of a connection is making Sam feel like reconnecting with Carly is inevitable. And maybe a part of her is getting used to the idea of seeing her former best friend and ex-girlfriend again. Maybe a part of her is wondering if it’s really necessary to insist on such distance, when she’s so happy with Cat.

And maybe another part of her is worried that her assurances to herself, that it would be alright, are just wishful thinking.

Tori scrutinizes her for a moment. “You’re being more reasonable about this than I thought.”

“Well, it’s not like I want to mess things up for Carly. And you and I are, like,” She wants to say they’re bonded for life, because it feels true, but it sounds too corny. “We get each other,” she settles on. “And I know you’d do anything you could to defend me and that you’re not about to set out to hurt me. So it’s just, trying to find the balance. Like Carly and I are a seesaw, and you’re standing in the middle of us. I don’t want to do anything to tip you over and I’m sure she doesn’t either. But she and I are on two different ends. We don’t meet.”

“Yeah,” Tori sounds pensive. “I guess you’ve just surprised me twice with all this stuff with Carly.”

“Again, I *don’t* hate Carly.”

“I just didn’t expect it from someone who...who it took me such a long time to find common ground with.”

“Yeah, well,” Sam shrugs. “Everything we went through to get to where we are now, maybe that helped me grow up a little.”

“We both did, I think. I know I’m still learning,” Tori replies.

“Yeah. Tell Carly the truth,” Sam tells her. “She deserves it, and so do you. I don’t want to be anybody’s dirty little secret.”

“You make it sound so scandalous,” Tori laughs.

“I’m a scandalous person to know,” Sam retorts.

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Another full moon is approaching, and Carly is no closer to figuring out how to make a connection with the werewolves of Los Angeles. Even her father is no help. His contacts are all top secret military, anyway, so even if they were allowed to meet and talk to Carly, it isn’t as though she’d have anything in common with them.

At this point, though, finding werewolf community is the least of Carly’s worries. She just would like to figure out where to buy wolfsbane and how to get to a park or somewhere that she won’t be disturbed if she’s there as a wolf. She’s still finding her feet in this city as a human, and her classes have made it difficult to find much time to explore even the clothing stores and smoothie shops she wants to visit, much less the parks and the mountains.

Besides, it isn’t as though she’s actually expecting to find a friendship like the one she had with Sam, even before their relationship evolved. Sam had been her very best friend for years before they discovered they were both werewolves, before they explored together the joy of transformation, of an untamed essence of being, before they’d deepened their connection, their understanding of each other by embarking on something distinctly unique and private together. Carly never found such a friendship in Italy. She had her father, sure, when he was around. But fathers and best friends turned lovers are worlds apart. Hell, Carly never even really found another *best friend* while in Italy, much less one who was also a werewolf.

She did find lovers, however. But none that she’d loved they way she loved Sam. And maybe still loves her. It hasn’t faded completely with time and distance. A particular longing has remained, a prevalent emptiness at the lack of Sam in her life.

Her mind often turns to Sam when the moon gets fuller. And that’s why, in her first Monday class, she thinks at first that it’s her imagination when she catches a whiff of Sam.

She perks up, nose lifting, almost gulping in air through her nostrils, head turning as if she’s just scanning the classroom idly as she seeks that scent again. The earthy scent of Sam, like some indescribable combination of leather and smoke and hard edges and subtle tenderness and *strength*. It’s still Carly’s favorite smell in the world, one that makes her very bones feel warm, her chest feel full.

At first, it seems like it’s gone, and Carly is disappointed. That is, until Tori sits in the seat next to her and smiles, offering a light, “Hey,” before she opens her bag to pull out her notebook.

And then Carly localizes the source of the smell.



She can smell Sam on Tori, distinct amidst Tori's crisp scent like fresh greenery and simple honesty.

Carly might have to reassess that aspect of Tori's scent if she's really walking in here with the smell of Sam in her hair without a thing to say to Carly about it.

While Carly continues to try to indulge in the scent of Sam as much as possible while it's still detectable in the air, Tori leans over toward her, bringing the smell of Sam closer. Carly gets so lost in it for a moment that she almost doesn't catch what Tori says. "Hey, do you have a little time after our composition class? I need to talk to you."

"Sure, I guess," Carly agrees.

Whatever is happening here, Tori had better have a good explanation.

Carly continues to catch whiffs of Sam through this class and the next, letting the pleasure of it echo through her flesh each time it happens. It's worth being a little distracted in class for something like this, a little treat that's been denied to her for so long, one that she doesn't get to enjoy anymore. She's going to savor it as much as she can for now.

After composition class, Tori suggests they go for a coffee and offers to drive to the Jet Brew close to campus, and Carly agrees. The car mostly smells like Tori and Jade, but Carly can still detect the hint of Sam on Tori. It's growing fainter by the minute, though. Carly wonders how soon it will be gone entirely.

Unexpectedly, Tori chooses the drive-through. Carly had kind of assumed they'd be sitting inside the coffee shop for whatever this chat is, but figures Tori must have her reasons. Maybe she's about to suggest they go somewhere else. But no, once they have their drinks, Tori pulls into a parking space. Odd. Carly sips her latte with a mild grimace. American coffee really can't compare to Italian coffee, and she's always thought Skybucks was better than Jet Brew anyway, but Los Angeles is Jet Brew country. Oh well. At least it's caffeinated.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about?" she finally asks as Tori fiddles with her hazelnut latte and doesn't speak.

"Well, um. It's two things. And I'm not really sure how to say them."

"Take your time," Carly says charitably, wondering how long she'll let Tori stall before she just comes right out and asks why she smells like Sam.

"I just hope that you can understand why all this happened."

Turns out, not very long. "Does this have something to do with Sam?" Carly asks bluntly. Maybe Sam's lingering essence lent her some strength, or just made her a little more impulsive.

Tori winces. "I kind of expected that." She sighs, turns a little more toward Carly in her seat. "The truth is...Sam and I are friends."

Carly wants to retort that Tori doesn't seem like Sam's type, but that's not fair. Nor is it really true, because Carly has always felt an affinity to Tori; they even dated the same guy once. Carly guesses she should be flattered that maybe Sam befriended someone who is actually kind of like Carly.

But she's not really flattered. She's jealous. And she feels angry with Tori for keeping something like this from her.

"How long have you known Sam?" Carly asks, her voice sharp, edged with her seething.

"Almost a year, I guess." Tori seems to be doing the math, and amends, "Maybe nine months or so."

"Okay," Carly replies in a light tone. She can sense the thrill of apprehension run through Tori at the forced ebullience in her voice. "Obviously there's a reason you kept this from me."

Tori hangs her head. "Sam told me a little bit about your history," she reveals. "And that she isn't ready to reconnect with you. I thought the fairest thing would be to not mention her to you."

Some of that makes sense to Carly. But then she remembers how standoffish Tori had been when they first met, how she'd warmed up to Carly in a way that felt sudden, and something clicks. "But Sam knows about me?"

Tori nods miserably. "I always try to do what's right, and I always try to be fair," she starts. "But obviously, I still sometimes fuck up. I thought I was doing right by Sam by letting her keep her distance. And I thought I could befriend you organically, without having to mention her. I didn't think it would be fair to you to tell you I knew Sam but to just reiterate that it didn't mean Sam wanted to reconnect." She looks away. "I'm really sorry. It wasn't until Jade talked to me that I realized how unfair that all was."

Normally, Carly would probably forgive Tori easily. She tends to be the type that forgives, even if she doesn't forget. But maybe because the full moon is so close, Carly isn't feeling all that charitable. "Yeah, okay. You thought we could build a solid friendship when you know all sorts of things about me that I never told you, and I get shut out from a big portion of your life. What else did Sam tell you?"

Carly doesn't really expect an answer. She's more seeking clarification. Did Sam actually tell Tori about their relationship? But Tori turns guilty puppy eyes to Carly. "That's the other thing I wanted to talk to you about. I'm a werewolf, too."

For a moment, Carly understands the euphemism about seeing red. It's not something she's ever experienced before. But then, *everything* about her situation right now seems almost designed to put her on edge: the tangibility of Sam, so close and yet inaccessible; the feeling of caging her wolf, not just in the sense of taking wolfsbane or staying in her apartment but in having to hide completely with no apparent strategy to emerge; the hurt of Tori's betrayal, and the realization of just how deep it runs; the stress of school, and living in a new city, and

feeling lonely and isolated and now the only friend she's really made has revealed that she has been hiding something *huge* from her.

It's all too much.

Carly breathes heavily through her nose for several long, quiet moments. She can still smell Sam. "Take me home," she says quietly.

"Carly, I'm sor—"

"Take me home," she repeats, more urgently. She's never been afraid of her more savage side, but she isn't sure what she's capable of in this state.

Tori drives her home. They don't speak. Carly's mind churns, she feels the wolf in the set of her jaw, in the prickle on the back of her neck, in the muscles of her shoulders. When Tori pulls up to her apartment, Carly gets out of the car as it's still parking, her animal reflexes helping her keep her balance as she more or less steps out of the car seamlessly, slamming the door behind her and marching up to her apartment.

But after screaming into her pillow, finishing her coffee, and having some dinner, Carly actually starts to feel a little better.

She's still angry, sure. But she's not furious. And she's starting to consider Tori's apology, Tori's position in all this, and *Sam*.

Who is still so close to her, yet completely out of reach.

She can understand why Tori might have chosen silence. Carly chose that, many times. Too many times. Freddie has no idea about her history with Sam because Carly insisted on silence. She can't say she fully understands Sam requesting distance from her...but Carly accepts it, as much as she wishes it were different. She can see how Sam's insistence on not reconnecting with her might have led to Tori making the choices she did, out of loyalty to a friend. Carly respects loyalty.

Still, it sucks to infer that Tori has known about her relationship with Sam, her queerness, and her being a werewolf for who knows how long and never saw fit to mention it to Carly, or to even draw her out about it.

By the time Carly wakes up the next morning, though, she's a lot less angry and she thinks she can move past all of this. Especially if it means Tori could finally be her connection to the werewolf community in Los Angeles.

Because, as with most things, there's definitely a silver lining in all this. Carly may have finally made another werewolf friend, in a city where she's bereft and isolated from werewolf resources.

She focuses on getting through her classes of the day. She and Tori don't share classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so she texts Tori, asking her if she'd like to talk after they're both finished with classes for the day.

This time, Carly suggests they just go to her apartment. She knows Los Angeles is very much a car city, but she got used to walking and taking public transportation in Florence, and her apartment is less than a mile from campus, meaning it's a distance she's comfortable walking. If the weather is bad or she's running late, she'll drive to campus, but sometimes jostling for a parking spot in the commuter lot means she doesn't actually save herself much time at all.

Tori seems a little surprised at the distance they've walked. Carly makes a mental note to offer her a ride back to her car after their talk.

And at least in her apartment, Carly can make some decent coffee. She offers some to Tori as she puts her moka pot on the stove (and a tea kettle, to dilute the espresso to make it an Americano, which Carly herself prefers, though she never admitted it when she lived in Italy). Tori accepts the offer of coffee as she looks around Carly's apartment.

"This is really cute," she comments.

"If by 'cute' you mean 'small,'" Carly quips, "then yeah, it's cute." She's used to small, though. It had been an adjustment, moving from an apartment that had been converted industrial space in Seattle and into a tiny little flat in Florence that she shared with her father. Moving from there into a studio apartment hadn't been that big of a difference. At least here she doesn't have to share the bathroom with anyone. It's a bit more like having the second floor of the apartment she shared with Spencer to herself, except with a kitchen crammed into a smaller living space than her childhood bedroom.

"Must be nice to have your own space, though," Tori comments. "I still have to share a bathroom with my sister. Luckily, she's home less and less these days."

"It's not the worst," Carly agrees. It's new, this feeling of independence (even if she's not exactly fully self-sufficient, considering her dad's financial support). It feels freeing but also kind of lonely. She's never lived alone before.

Tori occupies herself for a moment by looking at the books and DVDs on Carly's shelf next to her TV, and at the sparse decorations she's put up so far, while Carly listens to the moka pot to gauge when it's finished so she can make their coffees. When Tori sits down at the little table that serves as Carly's kitchen table and workspace, Carly passes her a cup of coffee (in one of the four mugs that Carly owns).

"I have milk and sugar if you need some," she tells Tori.

Tori takes a sip. "This is really good," she comments. "Maybe a little milk to cool it down."

"Sure." Carly passes some to Tori to splash into her coffee, then goes to sit on the couch, because there's only one chair at the little table.

"What did you want to talk about?" Tori finally asks when they're both seated with coffee.

Carly shifts on the sofa, taking a sip of coffee. "Yesterday didn't go so well," she starts.

"I know," Tori agrees, "And I'm sorry."

Carly nods. “And I accept your apology. After I cooled down a little...I mean, I still wasn’t happy. But I think I at least understand why you did what you did. And how you might’ve felt caught between Sam and me.”

“I really thought I could just maintain two separate friendships,” Tori tries to explain again.

“Well, you still are. And you’ll still have to. It’s just that now, at least Sam and I are on the same page.”

“Yeah. That’s the part I hadn’t really put together,” Tori laments.

“Okay. But now that it’s all out in the open...I guess I just kind of want to know what, exactly, you know. So that we can talk about it.”

“Right. Well.” Tori looks thoughtful. “I know that—well, I knew that you were at least into Sam before you told Jade and I that you were bisexual. Sam told me you two were together. Like, a secret thing, for a few years?”

That second detail seems to be a question, and Carly nods in response. “Yeah. Kind of on and off, until we were on, but...we weren’t ready to tell anyone.”

“Yeah,” Tori nods, “That’s pretty much what Sam said.”

“Who else knows?” Carly asks.

“Jade figured it out,” Tori reveals, “So she only knows that you two have a history, not really any details. Sam said she only ever told Cat.”

*Cat.* That name that Carly stared at on a postcard from Sam for weeks, wondering, hating that she felt jealous of three little letters who represented a person Carly knew nothing about, could only fill in her own worse assumptions about.

“Wait, do you...know about Cat?” Tori asks tentatively.

Carly nods gravely. “I heard from Sam once before moving here, and she mentioned her.”

Tori nods back, and seems to hesitate, then says, “Cat is why I even know Sam. She’s one of my best friends.”

Carly is undeniably curious, but holds back. Instead, she remembers *reacting* when early on when she’d met Tori, she mentioned a friend named Cat. Carly could only assume, at the time, that it had to be a coincidence. But of course, she knows now that it wasn’t. “I remember you mentioning her. I didn’t have any reason to assume it was the same Cat.”

Tori winces. “Because I was still hiding that I knew Sam.”

“Exactly.” She scrutinizes Tori. “So you know that Sam and I were in love.”

Tori nods. “Yeah.” She looks thoughtful. “It’s weird. There are little things I know about you both, from being fans of your show. It’s kind of weird to consider how much you never told

me about yourself that I just *know*. Like that you have a brother. And that you lived in Italy for a while. And that your dad is in the Air Force.”

“Doing that show means a lot of people think they know me. But you know me more than most.”

“Yeah,” Tori says quietly. “Because of the werewolf thing.”

Carly perks up a bit, because this is something she’s much more eager to talk about. “Yes! So Sam told you that, too?”

Tori nods. “She probably figured I was never going to meet you anyway. But we kind of got to talking, because I said I’d never had a friend my own age to really be a werewolf with. Like obviously there’s my sister, but she’s never liked being a wolf, in fact, she’s a constant wolfsbane user—which reminds me of another weird thing I know about you, about your brother.”

“You mean how Spencer always takes wolfsbane, too? That came up?”

Tori nods, “Yeah, because Sam’s twin is the same way. Just kind of a weird coincidence that we all have siblings who never change, for whatever reason.”

“I guess that is strange,” Carly agrees, considering. “Is your sister older?” When Tori nods, she notes, “We all have *older* siblings who do this, then. Because Melanie’s the older twin.”

“Huh,” Tori takes that in, too. “Anyway, like I was saying, I’d never really been a werewolf with a friend before I met Sam. But she told me that she had, with you. She told me this before I ever found out you two were, well, *more than* friends.”

“Weird that our relationship was a bigger secret than being werewolves,” Carly comments, but as she says it, she reevaluates. “Actually, no, I guess it makes sense. You don’t really have anything to lose by telling another werewolf who else is a werewolf. What happened between Sam and I is...more complicated.”

“I gathered that much,” Tori agrees quietly. “And to be fair, I don’t know when she told Cat about you. It’d be important to have that conversation first.”

“I guess you’re right.” Carly considers something else. “How much does Cat know?”

“I mean, Sam told me she knows that you two were together, and obviously she knows Sam is a werewolf. I don’t know if she knows you’re one, too, but I’m assuming she does. Sam doesn’t seem like the type to tell me something she hasn’t told Cat.”

Carly has to agree that Tori is probably right. She knows what Sam is like when she’s in love, the depth of her loyalty and devotion. “Great. So I know nothing about Cat, but she knows an awful lot about me.”

Tori shrugs helplessly. “Sam has a right to her own history.”

"I know, I know," Carly sighs. "It's not like I'd want her to keep anything from her new girlfriend. It's just *weird*, to realize you've kind of been a topic of conversation. Especially among humans." She squints at Tori. "Does Jade know you're a werewolf?"

Tori nods. "She's known since before we got together."

"Interesting," Carly comments, shaking her head. "I can't imagine sharing that kind of thing with a human. But then again, I've never been in love with a human before. I mean I dated after Sam, but it never really got serious."

"It's weird," Tori explains. "But...Jade and I didn't even necessarily always get along. We were friends, kind of. She was sort of getting suspicious of me, and I was tired of keeping a secret. Honestly, it was getting a little lonely, with my sister refusing to even acknowledge the wolf side of herself, and with my parents encouraging me to be independent, I was alone almost every full moon. And Jade...she's always had such a fascination with the bizarre, it felt almost *natural* to tell her what I am. Even if she didn't believe me at first." Tori smiles. "We spent a few nights together with me as a wolf before we realized that we really liked each other. And. That's how that happened."

Carly smiles. "I don't know if Sam told you, but I didn't even know I was a werewolf, too, until Sam had been secretly changing in my room for a few months. So in a way, I kind of get what it must be like to be a human who gets clued into this whole thing because I lived that for a few months before my brother told me what was really going on with me. But, Sam was my best friend, and she had no idea she was about to change until she just *did*." She remembers how it felt those first few nights, how she so quickly got used to seeing the wolf in her bedroom as *Sam*, how they learned how to communicate, how to have fun, how to enjoy each other's company even across what felt like a difference in species at the time.

"Believe me, I treasure the time I spend with Jade as a wolf. She makes me feel so special. But spending time with Sam during a full moon has been *so* incredible. Which reminds me, when she and I found out about each other, I had to show her where to buy wolfsbane and recommend a place she could go to change. I can do that for you, if you like."

"Oh, I was one hundred percent going to ask you about that," Carly replies enthusiastically. "I've had Spencer trying to find werewolf connections down here for me, but no luck. And it's not like I've had much time to look, myself. I'm so relieved that you're a werewolf, too, to be honest. I was starting to be afraid I'd have to break Sam's boundaries and ask her to help me out of sheer desperation."

"Well, you won't have to," Tori promises. "I'll help you out."

"Maybe we can go run around this weekend?" Carly asks hopefully, "I spent *all* last full moon in here." She gestures around her. "Even as a wolf, this was torture."

"I bet," Tori sympathizes. "Um, how does Thursday sound to you?"

"The sooner the better," Carly agrees.

## (Cold) Hope

Tori is relieved that the second conversation with Carly went about as well as it could. On the phone with Jade after that first talk, when Carly had been so angry that Tori could feel it on her skin and had demanded to be taken home, Tori had lamented how badly it had gone. Jade had indicated that Tori should've expected such a reaction, but she'd also offered comfort, telling Tori to give Carly some time to think on it. "If your friendship isn't a strong enough draw, I'll bet your connection to Sam will be," Jade had predicted cynically.

And, well, Tori has to admit she can't be sure that this isn't what had prompted Carly to agree to talk, but she doesn't think so. The pessimistic read that Tori finds most likely is that Carly needs her because she can help Carly navigate Los Angeles as a werewolf. But, that had ended up being the connecting point for Tori and Sam, so Tori isn't about to let that bother her.

Besides, everything is different after you change with somebody. Tori knows that's true whether you change with a human or a wolf. And she thinks that she and Carly are about to find even more common ground after running around in Shadow Creek Park together in a few days.

Tori fills Jade in on everything that night. They both happen to have enough free time for Tori to come over for the night, which is good, because the full moon is close, and Jade knows that means Tori needs release. By now, Jade has mastered the art of making Tori wait until she's almost growling with frustration before they fall into bed and the rhythm of their bodies moving along with Tori's animalistic passion brings them both over the edge, again and again, until exhaustion sets in.

After that, there's finally time to talk.

"I talked to Carly again today," Tori murmurs, head on Jade's shoulder.

"Another woman isn't generally my idea of good pillow talk, but okay," Jade snarks.

Tori pokes her side, making her squirm away before settling back down. "I just wanted to let you know that she forgives me, and that I'm going to show her how to navigate LA as a werewolf. Like I did for Sam."

"I'm happy for you," Jade replies dryly. "And how are you going to make sure you don't run into Sam when you show Carly all the same places you showed her?"

"We won't," Tori insists. "Because Sam and I talk, and so do Carly and I."

"Uh huh," Jade sounds unconvinced, but Tori's pretty sure that's just her general pessimism talking. "I don't envy you juggling *two* werewolf BFFs who don't want to see each other."

"I mean, I've never been a child of divorce—is this a rude comparison to make?"



Jade laughs. “How should I know? It’s not like I like either of my parents.”

Tori knows this isn’t entirely true. Jade and her father may not be speaking, but she knows it had been important to Jade that he understands her; at least, it had been a few years ago. And Tori knows that Jade definitely prefers her mother, even if she frequently complains about her. Which, Tori thinks Jade’s mom is nice, even if she isn’t home a lot because of her work. “Yeah, yeah,” is her response as she nuzzles Jade’s shoulder.

“Don’t you ‘yeah, yeah’ me,” Jade responds, clearly just being contrary.

“I’ll do what I want to you,” Tori shoots back.

“And what do you want to do to me?” Jade murmurs huskily.

Well. Tori hadn’t exactly been expecting round...four? Is that what they’re on? But she isn’t going to turn it down, either.

Later on, Tori realizes she never told Jade about her plan to take Carly to Shadow Creek Park on Thursday. But she decides that maybe it should just be her and Carly. Besides, it *is* a school night, and Jade is already supposed to drop off and pick up her and Sam on Friday. Tori doesn’t want to ask her to get up at dawn twice in one week. And Tori can drive herself now. She’s never seen a cop come up to Shadow Creek Park, and she figures she’ll just leave cloth sticking out of her car window, as a signal that she’s coming back for the car, in hopes that any authority will leave it alone and not assume anyone is up here at the park. But again, that’s really just a precaution. As far as Tori can tell, no one in Los Angeles has ever paid any attention to Shadow Creek Park, except for Jade.

And now, Tori is showing Carly what is, in her opinion, Los Angeles’s best kept secret: a derelict, deserted park that is an absolute paradise under the full moon.

They have time to drive through Inside Out Burger after their classes let out on Thursday. It’s really not an ideal day for a night in Shadow Creek Park, but Tori knows how desperate Carly is for a night out, and her Friday night has already been scheduled for her and Sam to run around, giving her Saturday to recover with Jade and Sunday to do homework. It’ll be a bit of a rough weekend, but Tori’s young. A few sleep-deprived nights are well worth a chance to run around and bond with friends.

She pulls her car up to the parking area at Shadow Creek Park. There really isn’t a discreet place to park it, so she just chooses a spot and leaves an old t-shirt in her window. “Jade usually drives me up here and picks me up at dawn,” she explains to Carly. “It’s more habit than anything, because she used to take me up here before I got my license. But we also like a chance to play together a bit before I go do my own thing and she goes home to get some sleep.”

Carly nods. “I know what that’s like. The times Sam changed when I didn’t, it was a lot like having a very smart, very enthusiastic puppy around. Not that I ever told her that, she’d hate it.”

Tori smiles. It's hard for her to describe how special wolf time is for her and Jade. To Tori, it's both the basis of their connection, what became their relationship, and a deeper form of it, a form of intimacy that is different from anything they experience when she's human. Jade can care for her, help her navigate a human world in a body not meant for it, and at the same time, Tori knows she can protect her. Their roles become defined when Tori is a wolf, in a way that is never possible when she's human. Which is fine, Tori doesn't like to be limited in options when she's a human. But there's something nice about knowing what to expect on a wolf night, knowing that Jade is the one who can talk and open doors and work remotes and Tori is the one who gets to be warm and playful and much, much stronger (though she's still always gentle with Jade).

She guides Carly into the grove of trees in the park. Like Sam, Carly seems comfortable in the trees, at ease. And, as was the case with Sam, Tori kind of forgets about the part where they're about to be naked together until she gets there.

"Uh, well. Guess we'd better get ready to change," she states unnecessarily, because Carly is already taking off her jacket.

Carly glances toward the horizon where the sun is steadily setting, though it's difficult to see detail through the trees. "Yeah, it will probably happen pretty soon," she comments as she starts to pull her shirt off. "I've got to get some wolfsbane tea or something. If there had been more traffic coming up here, we might've been in trouble without it."

"I always carry some tincture with me," Tori assures her, turning away modestly to start taking off her own clothes. "I'll take you to the dispensary as soon as I can. They've got all kinds of fast-acting options there." With her plans with Sam tomorrow, she's pretty sure she won't have time until after the full moon, but Carly had assured her that she had enough to work with for the moment. Tori wonders if Carly, like Sam, will find the range of products in Astra's dispensary impressive. But who knows what they had in Italy? "What did they have in Italy?" She might as well ask.

"My dad was the one who always got it," Carly explains, "And I think he got it from the military. Teas and tablets, mostly. Once he got wolfsbane-infused *grappa*." Her inflection on the word sounds particularly Italian. "Italian liquor," she explains. "Which I guess is for when you're a werewolf who wants to party. Tasted even worse than regular *grappa*. That stuff is *strong*."

"Never had it, but I'll take your word for it," Tori laughs, glances back at her out of habit to find Carly topless and stepping out of her pants. "Huh. I don't think I've ever seen wolfsbane infused alcohol."

"I can see why it wouldn't be very popular. It's not much fun being drunk and trying to hold back a wolf. But, Italian society runs on espresso and alcohol, so, maybe it works for them."

"Was there wolfsbane espresso?" Tori asks with interest.

"I wouldn't be surprised, but I never saw it." By now, Tori is naked and is certain Carly must be, too, but she's still looking away from her, standing angled away. "You said you change with Sam?" Carly asks abruptly.

Tori wonders if it's weird to take them to the same place. "Yeah. Every full moon."

"I'm surprised she hasn't teased the modesty out of you," Carly laughs.

"She has," Tori sighs. "Or, she's tried. But...you're you. It's different."

"Hardly," Carly scoffs. "I mean, obviously I'm not Sam, but it's just a human body. That is about to become *very* not human."

"I know, I know," Tori sighs. "I'm just still not used to it. My family always treated this part as so private."

Carly's face scrunches in an adorable sort of way. "Okay, you know, that's a good point. I never changed with my family when I was young. It was always just me and Sam. I guess if I had started changing with Spencer or my dad, I might be more modest, too."

"That's kind of what Sam said."

They lapse into silence for a moment. Tori wonders if all of this is a lot for Carly. The fact that Sam keeps coming up in conversation, the fact that lycanthropy itself seems inextricably tied to Carly's former lover. Tori wonders if it's profoundly lonely for Carly, to have such a deep part of herself to feel so marked by a relationship that is decidedly over. She wonders whether Carly thinks of Sam every time she changes, if it's possible for her not to.

But they don't have long to dwell on things before Tori feels a ripple run through her flesh, and knows it's about to happen. "Ready?" she asks Carly unnecessarily.

"I'm *so* ready," Carly gushes, flexing her fingers and rolling her shoulders, as if trying to help the change along.

The transformation overtakes them both, and Tori watches the way Carly's skin seems to shift and remold before closing her eyes, deciding to offer Carly privacy in a vulnerable state. Maybe nudity is no big deal, but Tori thinks the change itself is the part that's the most alarming, the most intimate.

And quickly, they're two wolves, and the sensory information that hits Tori's newly sharpened senses is a rush of the newness of Carly amidst the familiarity of Shadow Creek Park. There's the sense of her as a stable, easy-going presence, the scent of her, sharp like citrus fruit, the excitement that emanates from her. There's the deep walnut hue of her fur, darker than Tori's, lustrous. Tori's instincts tell her, with even more clarity now, that Carly is *fun*. Carly is someone she's going to enjoy spending time with.

They sniff one another, noses nearly touching in greeting, before Tori bounds through the underbrush, inviting Carly to chase her. Carly emits a little yip as she follows, and Tori feels her heart rate pick up at the promise of play.

Perhaps predictably, Carly is not quite as aggressive as Sam, but Tori can sense that she's letting loose a little, running faster and further, like a puppy let off its leash for the first time. They play tag, Tori shows Carly some of the best areas to smell, they run races. Tori expects

that Carly might be a little more apt to wrestle, like Sam, especially considering the fact that they grew up as werewolves together and how much she's indicated she needs this opportunity to be a little wild, but Carly doesn't play rough with her. That's okay with Tori, though. There's still plenty of other ways to have fun together.

Eventually, though, Tori knows her energy is flagging and it seems like she's finally worn down Carly, and the two of them retreat to the trees to curl up together and get some sleep.

All in all, Tori thinks it's a pretty damn good night in the park with her new friend.

In the morning, when the cool air on their bare human skin and the dawn light wake them up, she and Carly redress, and Carly is absolutely glowing.

"God, I needed that," she gushes. "Thank you so much."

"Anytime," Tori laughs, then twists her face. "I mean, not any time, because what would we do here if it wasn't a full moon?"

"I will definitely take you up on that," Carly vows. "I mean, really, next time you're going, I'd love to come."

Tori grins awkwardly. "Of course. I'll let you know." But of course, Carly *can't* come next time she's going. Because she's coming here tonight. With Sam.

Carly seems to read something in her expression, or maybe in her tone. "Ah," she says quietly. "You're taking Sam here next."

Tori nods, feeling oddly guilty. "Tonight," she admits.

Carly nods. "Well, just let me know. I won't crash your night. I'd much rather come here with you but if I need to go somewhere by myself sometime...anyway, just let me know," she finishes.

"I will," Tori promises.

It's not supposed to be complicated. She's supposed to just have two friends whose circles don't overlap. But Tori hadn't counted on the fact that all of their similarities make this very difficult.

The consequence of Tori's honesty is that she already feels a bit trapped between Carly and Sam.

-

Sam is not thinking about Carly.

It's true in the sense that there really isn't much to think about when it comes to her ex, and it's true because whenever Carly *does* cross her mind, Sam makes herself think about something else. Which is pretty easy. Because she can think about food, or Cat, or sex, or sex with Cat, and then, Carly is out of her mind.

A few times, Sam finds herself wondering what happened when Tori told Carly that she knows Sam. Tori hasn't said anything, and it's not as though Sam wants to reach out and ask. In fact, she shouldn't even wonder at all, because Tori's friendship with Carly is none of her business. But she is curious how Carly might've reacted. Did she get angry? She knows her friend hates secrets (except, apparently, her own). But she also knows that Carly is quicker to forgive than she is, even if she also never forgets and sometimes holds onto grudges. But they also haven't spoken in a year. Sam knows she's grown and changed in that time. She wonders if Carly has, too. What could a year in Italy do for a person?

By Friday, she's eager enough about Shadow Creek Park that it's easy not to think about Carly at all. They have their usual ritual; she and Cat finish up on campus and drive home in Nona's car, then switch it out for the motorcycle to take across town to Tori's house. Jade has already picked up El Taco Guapo, and they eat in the car on the way to Shadow Creek Park. The fact that winter is coming, and college classes let out at variable times, means Sam knows there may not be convenient opportunities to meet in Shadow Creek Park every month, and she's happy that they're able to follow something close to their usual ritual as they head out to enjoy a full moon.

The routine is easy and natural as Jade parks the car while Sam finishes everyone else's fast food scraps, and the group chats for a minute as the sun goes down. When it's closer to sunset, Sam kisses Cat and follows Tori out into the park. It's just like any other trip to the park together, except the scent of Tex-Mex lingering on her hands, the flavor of it still heavy on her tongue.

But El Taco Guapo isn't enough to disguise the familiar scent she catches as she steps into the clearing with Tori.

*Carly.* Specifically, Carly as a wolf. Sam can smell her lingering scent, nestled among the leaves and greenery of the underbrush, enclosed and preserved by the thicket, keeping the wind from dispersing it.

As she stops cold, she looks at Tori, and by her expression, she can see that Tori knows exactly why she stopped. She winces. "It's difficult to maintain separate connections when you two know each others' scents so well," she tries, her voice half in jest and half on edge.

"You took Carly here?" Sam asks, mostly rhetorically, since her nose can also tell her that without question Tori as a werewolf was here last night, too. She scrutinizes Tori, really for the first time since they all met up and quickly piled into Jade's car to start their drive up here. "No wonder you look exhausted. You were out last night."

"Thanks," Tori rolls her eyes. "And...yes. I took Carly here. It's the best spot and I figured as long as I never brought you both at the same time..." she trails off.

Sam groans. "Damn it, Tori," she curses, not really certain if she is actually angry or not, but she feels a tension in her body that she can't keep in. "How the fuck am I supposed to avoid her if she keeps showing up everywhere?"

"I'm doing my best," Tori argues defensively. "This isn't supposed to be hard, but it seems like I can't do anything without reminding both of you that the other exists."

“Look, I can understand that you had to talk to me about her. I can understand that you needed to tell her about me. But I can’t understand why you keep rubbing my nose in the fact that you’re friends!”

“I’m not *trying* to!” Tori flings out her hands in frustration. “Also, I barely even *had* to tell Carly I knew you because she could *smell* you on me as soon as I came into class on Monday. I had all day in your apartment to collect your scent, even showering didn’t wash you out of my hair completely!” She huffs out a breath. “I don’t know how to not ‘rub your nose’ in it if you’re both just always searching for evidence of the other!”

She can tell Tori is getting angry by the exaggerated way she makes air quotes as she says “rub your nose” in a bad, grumbly imitation of Sam. But that isn’t the detail that sticks with her. “Both?” she asks.

“See?” Tori challenges, eyes widening.

Sam wants to retort, but she feels a light thrill run through her and glances at the horizon. “Shit.”

Tori follows her gaze. “Shit is right,” she curses, already tugging at her blazer to shuck it off.

They peel off their clothes in record time, quickly enough that they’re standing naked together, facing each other, and the silence stretches as they wait for the change to actually begin. Tori squints slightly without her glasses as they stare.

“Look,” Tori says in a low voice, when it’s clear they still have a minute. “I can’t be your… your Carly sobriety sponsor,” she bursts out.

“Oh, right,” Sam snarls in response, “Like I’m actually *asking* you to do anything?”

“Sam, I can’t do this!” she growls back, but before either of them can say anything else, Sam feels a powerful shiver run down her spine, and sees Tori’s spine hunch.

They lock eyes, staring at each other as the transformation begins. Sam stares at Tori’s eyes until they begin to shine with a luminescent amber undertone before her own transformation forces her eyes closed.

When she’s fully transformed, Tori is still facing her, eyes still meeting hers in challenge, and Sam snarls her lip to show her teeth slightly in an answering sneer.

Tonight, when they burst out from the trees toward Cat and Jade, their playful wrestling is rougher. It’s not like the fight they had with Sam’s mom; no teeth or claws are actually being unleashed, but they continue to bowl each other over, rolling to see who lands on top.

Sam pins Tori down, feeling in an odd way like she’s laying a claim to her, like she’s demanding that Tori stop seeing Carly, but Tori quickly gains the upper hand, the set of her shoulders and the defiance in her eyes tell Sam that she’ll do what she wants.

It seems like the struggle for dominance lasts for a long time, but it couldn’t be too long, because Cat and Jade are there, both of them expressing concern for the way Tori and Sam

are wrestling, trying to verbally stop them without actually physically getting between the pair of tussling werewolves.

The sound of their girlfriends' voices seems to register with both of them at once, and they stop in unison. Sam feels her ears droop as she looks at Tori, and feels all the fight leave her in a moment, all her aggression drain out as she sniffs the air and is surrounded by the scent of people she cares about: Cat, especially Cat, but also Jade, and even Tori. Sam knows Tori is important to her, and she knows her nose doesn't lie.

Tori seems to be having the same kind of reaction, and her shoulders relax, her eyes soften. The two of them lunge forward; Sam hears Cat gasp, but they're just sniffing each other vigorously, noses almost touching, before they both shift their muzzles to the nape of the other's neck, inhaling deeply, both aware of the vulnerability of their position and both trusting the other's teeth next to their throat.

After their scuffle, she and Tori spend the rest of the evening like normal. Sam feels the hair at the back of her neck prickle a little as they retire to their copse to sleep and Sam realizes she is about to lie down just where Carly was the night before, but she does so without fussing.

In the morning, Sam wakes up as her transformation begins and watches as Tori wakes up to the chill of her fur slipping away from her. They stare at each other for a long moment, but this time, it isn't a challenge. It's a connection.

"Look." Tori is the first to speak. "I'm really sorry. Everything came out so wrong last night."

"Don't be," Sam insists.

But Tori keeps speaking, not letting her interrupt. "What I was trying to say is...I'm not the one with a problem here. I like you both. I want to be friends with you both. You two are the ones with a problem with each other, and so...if anyone needs to make a decision about who they hang out with, it's you."

Sam looks away, picking up her underwear to start dressing. "I know that," she says. "It's my problem, and I'll handle it."

Tori seems satisfied with that response as she tugs on her jeans, but her mouth twists slightly. "But, even if it's ultimately your thing...I could have done better. I should have at least told you that I took Carly here. But you two don't always make it easy. I never know what's off-limits when it comes to you two."

"Well," Sam begins, twisting her bra around her body after latching it. "I can't really promise anything, but I hope that next time we talk about this, I'll be able to tell you nothing's off limits."

"You're going to talk to Carly?" Tori sounds surprised.

"At this point, it's stupid not to," Sam says heavily. "I mean, I'm not trying to be best friends with her again. Or even friends at all. But if we can just, like, coexist..." she trails off.

“It would certainly make things easier,” Tori agrees tentatively.

“I don’t really get boundaries,” Sam discloses. “Not with human stuff, anyway. It’s so much simpler when you’re a wolf. My territory, my food, my person, whatever. Human shit complicates things. And, like, you’ve met my mom. Besides, Carly and I never had boundaries, we were like...joined at the hip. So sometimes I don’t know whether my boundaries are stupid and just me being stubborn or something I actually need. And I don’t think I actually need to avoid Carly for the rest of my life. Especially when people important to me are also important to her.” Sam is reasonably certain of this. Carly isn’t a temptation. She has Cat, and she’s happy with just Cat, and that’s not going to change. Running into Carly every once in a while isn’t going to change the way she feels about Cat. Nothing can.

Tori frowns, “I don’t think your boundaries were stupid. They just changed.”

“I guess.” Sam waves a hand. “And this is why I say I don’t get boundaries. I didn’t know they *could* change.”

“They can!” Tori’s brow scrunches. “At least, I think they can. I don’t really think I’m that great at them, either, now that I think about it.”

“Spencer always said the real curse of werewolves was having to figure out how to live in a human world,” Sam relays.

“That’s deep.”

“It’s something, all right.” Spencer’s strokes of brilliance might be rare, but in Sam’s experience, they were always memorable.

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Carly spends her Friday night in her apartment, a wolf curled up on her small loveseat, watching whatever comes on TV until she falls asleep. Pretty anticlimactic, especially after the night before, when she finally had a chance to run around in nature with Tori. But there’s no need to waste wolfsbane when she’s just having a lazy night in on her own.

When she wakes up on Saturday morning, she has to take a moment, just because it always kind of disorients her to fall asleep as a wolf and wake up as a human. She gets her bearings, turns off her TV, and cleans up after the snacks she ate the night before. It’s still early in the morning, just after dawn. Carly definitely wants a few more hours of sleep before she starts her weekend.

After she brushes her teeth and gets in bed, she checks her PearPhone, out of habit. She didn’t really miss much, though she ends up idly scanning SplashFace for a few minutes before she decides she should set her phone aside and go back to sleep.

But just when she’s about to close the app and set her phone aside, a text pushes through from Tori.



**Sam asked me to text you**

**to make sure you don't have her blocked**

**Because she wants to reach out to you**

Carly is immediately awake.

**Of course she's not blocked**

"So I *was* blocked," Carly murmurs to herself as her eyes scan over Tori's message again. Sam would probably assume that if Carly surmised she'd been blocked by Sam, that she'd block Sam in return. But Carly had never done that. Despite everything, she still thinks of Sam as her best friend, because Sam is, quite literally, the best friend Carly has ever had, even though their circumstances have changed. She wonders what happens when you unblock someone. Is Sam about to get all the messages Carly sent over the past year and a half, all the times she poured her heart out, assuming (rightly) that Sam would never see it? Okay, it hadn't happened all that often, because a part of Carly thought it was possible that Sam hadn't blocked her, and it seemed pretty pathetic to send an "I miss you" text to someone who didn't care enough to respond. But Carly can just imagine Sam's face at the messages that pour into her PearMessage app.

She runs a quick ZapLook search, and is relieved to find that such messages would have vanished into the ether, and that Sam will never see them.

But now, Carly is awake, because Tori has indicated that Sam is going to text her. And Carly knows that doesn't necessarily mean it's going to happen right now, but...just in case...she wants to be awake if it does.

She stares at her PearPhone for a long time, waiting to see if it's going to light up in her hand.

It doesn't.

When she finally starts to drift off with her phone in her hand, she turns its sound on and rolls over to fall restlessly asleep. Restless because every app beeps and buzzes with notifications that are never a text from Sam, waking her up frequently.

Eventually, Carly gets out of bed to have some breakfast and coffee, deciding she might as well start her day, though she leaves her phone's sound on, so she won't miss it when Sam texts her.

Sam may have made up her mind that talking to Carly is what needs to happen, but she knows she also needs to talk to Cat before she can do it.

But, as she considers how she's going to have this conversation over early morning breakfast at the diner, she realizes she may have to start at the beginning. Because when it comes to Carly in Los Angeles...she and Cat really haven't discussed that at all.

It isn't a secret Sam really meant to keep. It isn't even really a *secret*. It's just that Sam knew that Carly was going to school with Tori and that the two of them were striking up a friendship and...never really got around to telling Cat. Because what good would it do? If Tori was keeping her friendship with Carly separate from Sam, that necessitated keeping it separate from Cat, too. Cat didn't need to know, and so, Sam never mentioned it.

Which she can rationalize as something she did for Cat, to keep her from worrying, but Sam also knows she did it because it was easier for her. Easier than explaining why Cat shouldn't worry, because Sam is over Carly. With all of Cat's sensitivities about Sam being her first, and about Carly being Sam's, Sam doesn't want to give Cat anything to fixate on, and having Carly just one degree of separation away from them seems like something to fixate on.

But, again. That's just Sam finding it easier to continue on with Cat as normal rather than to derail things, if only slightly and temporarily, to deal with any feelings Cat may have about the situation that Sam has kept hidden from her.

When they get back to their apartment, they lie down in Cat's bed for a little bit, dozing together as they both catch up on sleep they missed the night before. When they roll back out of bed, Sam is ready for lunch.

And she's trying to make herself be ready to talk.

Cat brews more coffee, which, along with food, helps Sam focus. As they finish up their meal and Sam helps Cat rinse their dishes before putting them in the dishwasher, Sam finally bites the bullet. "Can we talk?"

Maybe not the best way to start a conversation. Cat raises her eyebrows, and Sam can feel a thrill of trepidation run through her. "Of course!" Cat replies. It must be her actor training that makes her voice sound so natural, full of her typical cheer and eagerness.

Sam refills her coffee cup and goes to sit over on the couch, taking a grounding sip of the hot beverage as Cat sits primly beside her, facing her, eyes keen and attentive. Sam shifts to face Cat. Even after idly thinking about this all morning, she still doesn't know the best way to approach this conversation. She finally just says. "I need to talk to you about, um, Carly."

Cat blinks, but it's her only reaction. Her face is otherwise open and curious. "Okay," she says simply. Sam can't tell if there's actually a note of anxiety in Cat's voice or if she just expects to hear it.

"So, it turns out she is going to college here in LA. She's at UCLA. And she has classes with Tori and they're friends."

Maybe that's a lot to lay out on Cat all at once. She gives Cat a moment to digest that. Cat is quiet, but only for a moment, before she nods slowly and starts to grin. "Good for Tori!" she gushes. "I know I don't know Carly but I feel like they'd be good friends."

Sam nods warily. "They seem to be, yeah."

"Okay," Cat says simply. Her eyes narrow slightly. "Is that all you wanted to talk about?" she asked, sounding slightly incredulous.

"No." Sam drops her gaze. "No, there's more. Tori at first tried to keep it secret from Carly that she knows me, but it was just getting awkward. So she talked to me, then to Carly. So Carly knows that I know that she's in school with Tori and I know that Carly knows that I know and—" she stops, mentally assessing what she'd just said. "Yeah, that's right," she says, mostly to herself.

"Well, it wouldn't be very fair if you knew about Carly and she didn't know about you," Cat says diplomatically.

"That was kinda what I was thinking," Sam agrees. "So because of that Tori ended up letting Carly know that she's a werewolf, too. So they ran around together this weekend, too. And it's just—it's getting harder and harder to keep separate from Carly with the fact that she and Tori are getting so close. She's even hung out with Jade and I think Andre, too."

"Jade and Andre?" Cat seems surprised by that detail, but then her face falls a little. "How come I haven't heard about this?"

She sounds a little hurt, and Sam knows all she can do is take the blame. "It has to be because of me," she states. "Everyone knew I wanted to be separate from her, so they were doing their best to keep me separate. I'm pretty sure Tori must've texted Andre not to mention me when she found out that he and Carly shared a class."

"But I'm not you."

"Yeah, but you're pretty closely connected to me," Sam points out, lip twitching a bit in a smirk.

"Yeah, that's true." Cat looks away, expression thoughtful. "I guess it makes sense, I just didn't realize how it was something everyone just decided without me."

"I didn't think of it that way," Sam said. "I didn't want to tell you about it because—because it was easier for me to just ignore Carly and not have to have this conversation with you. Because the reality is...I'm going to have to talk to Carly again."

"Okay," Cat replies evenly.

Sam squints at her. It's difficult to tell how she's feeling because her scent seems...jumbled. But that's probably because in this short conversation, Cat has had a lot of feelings, from uncertainty to the mild sense of betrayal at being kept in the dark to confusion and awkwardness and concern and apprehension. "Okay?" she presses.

Cat shrugs. “Nobody really seems to think that Carly is any of my business, so why should it matter to me?” There’s a touch of petulance in her tone.

Sam sighs heavily. “I *do* think that Carly is your business! That’s why I’m telling you this!”

Cat looks away sullenly. “Okay. Thanks, I guess. But you should still do what you want. I’m not going to tell you you can’t be friends with Carly. You were the one who decided that, not me.”

“I know that. And I was comfortable with that decision. Hell, I’m *still* not sure I want to be friends with her again, but I at least have to confront her. Not, like, that we’re going to have a confrontation. I didn’t mean it like that. But we have to talk. So we can at least find out how to coexist with the same friend group. Because we’re starting to overlap a lot and...we just need to talk. But that’s it.” Sam realizes she’s been rambling a little and stops talking.

Cat gazes at her keenly. “That’s it?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Sam says decisively. She hesitates, then decides to voice the thing that she worries Cat fears. “This isn’t going to change anything between us.”

But maybe that’s the wrong way to frame it, because Cat frowns. “Of course not. Why should it?”

“I just mean. I still choose you. I still always will. I don’t want you to worry that I can’t handle seeing Carly.”

“I wasn’t worried about that,” Cat says slowly.

Sam’s mouth tightens. “I’m not worried about it, either. I just worried you were.”

“Sam,” Cat shifts on the couch, smoothing out her skirt, seeming to take a moment to collect herself. “It’s really okay. I feel weird that people thought it would hurt me to know that they’re befriending Carly. That doesn’t bother me at all, I want people to make friends! Friends are amazing! And that includes you. I know you keep saying you don’t even want to be friends with Carly, but if you wanted to, I would be fine with it.”

“Even though,” Sam says slowly, “you know that a part of me will always love her?” she finishes quietly.

“Yes.” Cat meets her eye. “Because you promised to always choose me.”

Sam smiles at the repetition of her promise, the one that means so much to both of them.

“And I always will.”

“And I know that, too.” Cat’s brow furrows. “What worries me is that you seem so conflicted and anxious about this.”

“I’m really okay,” Sam promises. “I was mostly worried about how you’ll react. Because I know that it isn’t always easy for you, to know that Carly was my first love.”

“Just because I have a feeling about something doesn’t mean it’s wrong. And you and Carly making everyone else tiptoe around you two *and* around me is more wrong than me feeling a little bit wistful about you two having been in love before.”

Sam nods slowly. “When did you get so smart?” she asks.

“When did you stop being so brave?” Cat counters sharply.

Sam blinks in surprise. “Touche, I guess.”

“Talk to Carly. I’ll be just fine, and so will you two. I can feel it.”

Sam doesn’t know why Cat is so confident about this, but she has a feeling that Cat might be right, all the same.

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It isn’t until the late afternoon that Sam texts her. Predictably, it just says:

**Hey**

But then, a moment later:

**It’s Sam**

Carly shakes her head. She doesn’t know what Sam thinks she did, but Sam’s phone number is still the same, and she’s still in Carly’s contacts list on her phone. Of course Carly knows who this is.

**Hi Sam**

**It’s Carly**

It’s an equally stupid response to a ridiculous first point of contact in over a year, aside from some postcards that felt more alienating than like connection. Carly grins at the absurdity of it.

But for the next minute or so, there isn’t a followup text from Sam. So Carly decides to send another.

**Okay, you texted me to talk about something  
other than you being Sam, right?**

**Yeah hold on I was trying to think  
of what to say**

Carly sighs, but doesn't text back, giving Sam the requested moment to think. But then, almost immediately, she texts again.

**We should talk**

Carly lifts her eyebrow.

**Isn't that what we're doing right now?**

It's honestly never been this hard to communicate with Sam before. Carly wonders when they grew so far apart that they stopped being able to understand each other. Even with the time and distance apart, Carly still had always felt connected to Sam, like...primally, was the best way she could think about it. But she supposes it's obvious that Sam didn't feel the same way.

**No I mean like really talk**

**In person**

It's something Carly has wanted to hear for a long time. She feels an involuntary thrill in her chest at the idea of being able to *see* Sam, to have her in front of her, to be able to smell not just the lingering scent of her on someone else, but Sam *herself*. It's been one thing to know that Sam is around, that she and Sam know people in common, but it's something else entirely to think about actually being in Sam's presence, herself.

It's been a year and a half since she hugged Sam goodbye in that elevator, and Carly has thought about that moment so many times, wondering if it would be their last moment together. She's thrilled that it might not be.

**Sounds good**

It's such a short, nonchalant answer, completely obfuscating Carly's intense feeling about all of this.

**Um I know it's a school week and everything**

**Maybe next weekend?**

**We can meet at Jet Brew or something**

**Sure**

**Anytime after 3 on Friday**

**Or whenever Saturday**

**Just name the time and place**

**Okay**

**I will**

That seems to be the end of it. But Carly doesn't want it to be.

**See you next weekend then**

**Yeah**

**See you then**

It's stilted, it's awkward, it's simply an exchange of information, nothing personal or intimate about it.

But this simple text exchange is all Carly can think of for the rest of the night.

The school week is busy, so Carly expects it to go by quickly. And in some ways, it does, except that it's also the only thing separating her and Sam right now. Just time itself, seeming to stretch longer, as Carly contemplates seeing Sam that weekend. What will it be like to see her again? How much has she changed? What does she want to *talk* about?

Carly has some idea of that. It's obvious that with their circles overlapping, it seems inevitable that they might run into each other one of these days. It's probably smart of Sam to want to talk *before* that happens.

Or maybe she just wants to tell Carly, in no uncertain terms, to stay the hell away from her. That she was here first, this is her turf, and if they happen to be in the same place, it's Carly's responsibility to leave.

It's hard to say. Especially since she feels like she doesn't know Sam anymore. The Sam she once knew (*once loved*) would never make such a demand from her. That Sam would have fought for her, without question. But she also knows Sam can be ruthless, reckless...and extremely protective of the people she loves.

Which doesn't include Carly anymore.

She hates the thought that she might be just an interloper in Sam's life now, and nothing more.

But she doesn't let herself dwell on this worst-case scenario. No use getting worked up about something that might not even happen. Sam is also loyal to a fault. Even if there's no affection left between them, maybe some of that loyalty could remain, and maybe it could lead to a better conversation with Sam. One where they can reach some kind of understanding.

Maybe even a reconnection between them.

Not romantic, of course. Though in her heart of hearts, Carly knows she'd be overjoyed if that happened, she also knows it's unrealistic. Sam has someone, and is happy. Tori confirmed only too recently that Sam was still seeing this *Cat* that Carly learned about last spring, from a postcard that detailed Sam's happiness. Carly knows she can't stand in the way of Sam's happiness with someone else, even if a dark part of herself imagines what it might be like to sweep Sam off her feet, steal her away from this new girlfriend, and fall in love all over again with the one person who had been Carly's constant for so much of her life.

On Thursday night, Sam finally texts her to suggest they meet on Friday afternoon, at the Jet Brew near Carly's campus. Carly readily accepts. It's another brief exchange, nothing more than three texts, and it gives Carly no idea of what to expect from tomorrow.



Except that she's going to actually see Sam.

After class, Carly has enough time to walk back to her apartment to drop off her books and make herself an early dinner. She kills a little bit of time trying to watch TV, though she can barely pay attention. The time of mindlessly flipping channels seems to drag until Carly can't stand it anymore and she begins walking to the Jet Brew. It's a little further than campus, but it's a nice afternoon, and Carly figures if she stays moving, it'll be better than just rattling around her apartment, waiting until it's time to drive over to the Jet Brew, trying to gauge how early she can arrive without seeming desperate.

In truth, she anticipates that she'll arrive early on foot, too, but not ridiculously so. If she has time to order a coffee before Sam gets there, it'll at least still be hot when she joins her.

But it turns out she doesn't have to worry about that, because just as Carly is about to enter the Jet Brew, she hears the unmistakable sound of a motorcycle as it turns the corner to park next to the building. It's probably not actually a parking space, but if it's Sam, she certainly wouldn't be all that concerned about legality.

And one look tells Carly it is Sam. The blonde curls that cascade out of the motorcycle helmet and tumble down her back are so familiar, Carly is immediately certain it can't possibly be another blonde woman. Not to mention, the height is about right, and Carly even thinks the motorcycle itself looks familiar, though she's less certain about that, since they all look pretty much the same to her.

But as the motorcycle helmet comes off and the rider immediately turns to look directly at her, Carly knows instantly that she's right. And as if carried to her by Sam's gaze, she catches the scent of her in the air at almost the same moment.

And then, Sam Puckett is approaching her, as Carly stands just beside the front door of the coffee shop and waits. Sam stops just a few feet away from her and shoves her hands into the pockets of her jeans. "Hey, Carls."

It sounds so strangely unnatural coming out of her mouth, even though it's something Sam has said probably a thousand times before. But there's a guardedness to it, an uncertainty. Nevertheless, Carly can't help but smile back at her, a full smile. "Hi, Sam."

She can see Sam struggle to remain stoic as her lip lifts into a reactionary smile of her own, but then she gestures toward the door. "Come on, let's get some coffee."

Sam lets Carly enter the shop first, a move that feels both chivalrous and predatory; the wolf side of her knows how vulnerable it is to let another powerful creature that she's not exactly on friendly terms with stand behind her. But she decides not to comment on it or even turn her head, to show Sam that she trusts her.

There isn't a line, so they're able to order right away, and Carly stands awkwardly nearby as Sam puts in her own order. When she pulls out her wallet to pay, Carly's heart leaps, because she recognizes it right away. She remembers finding the leather shop (and the wonderful way that it smelled), remembers asking for that engraving (*Under the same full moon*), remembers sending it to Spencer to ask him to send it along to Sam, pretending it was just to avoid

paying international shipping to two addresses. She'd always wondered whether Sam had received it, and what she thought of it. The fact that she's carrying it, and using it, makes Carly feel warm. But then, Sam is nothing if not practical, and maybe it's less sentimental than Carly assumes.

She wants to ask about it, but knows it's absolutely too early to try to discuss something like this. Carly tries to take solace in the fact that Sam even has it with her.

After Sam orders, they both stand at the other counter waiting for their drinks, neither of them speaking, just facing each other, but both pretending to be interested in the floor or the walls. Carly breathes very deliberately, taking in the smell of Sam. In person, she can identify the vague notes of her personal scent that have shifted since they were last a part of each other's lives. Different cosmetics, or maybe a different diet, has altered Sam slightly, though the core scent of her, her *essence*, is the same in so many ways. Even the sense of her that Carly gets is the same: Sam has a tough exterior, but deep down she cares deeply, and she can't tolerate being hurt.

Carly feels a twisting in her guts when she remembers that she hurt Sam, very badly. Even though it hadn't been her intention, even though she can't regret the decision that had changed her life...she hates to think about it.

When their drinks are ready, Sam guides her to a table in the corner, as far away from other people as they can get. Sam's coffee is hot and black, Carly's latte is light and tasteless. They both sip, not seeming to know what to say.

Carly finally decides to start them off. "It's good to see you."

It's honest. Maybe too honest, given the way Sam shifts in her seat and nervously fidgets with her coffee cup. Carly takes her in, now that there's really nowhere to look but *at* her. She looks largely the same: her hair is a little wild from being on a motorcycle, but looks about the same length and style that Carly remembers. She's wearing a leather jacket over a t-shirt and jeans, which seems pretty standard for her, but the t-shirt is a little bit more stylish than the tomboyish ones Sam used to wear, and Sam's heeled boots are new. She noticed when they were standing that they even add a few inches of height, though Carly is still taller. Sam seems almost the same since they last saw each other, it's easy to think that no time has passed.

Except that the awkwardness between them is abundant evidence that things aren't the same.

"Yeah," Sam finally says, "You, too."

But as much as the words they've just exchanged could mean something, *anything*, they feel hollow. It's pretty clear they're not about the jaunt down memory lane together. So Carly steers them elsewhere. "So. Why did you want to meet me to talk?"

Sam shrugs, eyes briefly meeting Carly's before dropping back to her coffee cup again. "I dunno. I guess because...we're starting to know a bunch of the same people. And that kind of made me feel like, sooner or later, we were going to run into each other somewhere. And I guess I'd rather that happen the first time because we both expected it."

Well, Carly knows she's right about some of her musings. Sam probably wouldn't have reached out if not for the fact that their social circles are beginning to turn into a Venn diagram. But she's also not telling Carly to stay the hell away from her yet. "Yeah, I was pretty surprised the day I smelled you on Tori," she tells Sam quietly.

"And I was pretty surprised the day I smelled you in Shadow Creek Park." Carly raises her eyebrows, and Sam quickly amends. "Not because I didn't know you knew Tori. I even knew that Tori was going to show you around the, uh, special spots of LA, like she did for me. I just hadn't known that it was going to be the day before I was there."

"So Tori's not always forthright with you, either?" Carly asks. She doesn't really mean it as a slight. She understands why Tori hadn't been honest with her right away. But she'd assumed Tori had been more honest with Sam, because Sam is where her loyalty lies.

"It wasn't really her fault," Sam sighs. "I haven't exactly made it easy for her to talk about you. She didn't know what would be okay to bring up and what would be better left hopefully unknown."

"But you talked to her about me enough for her to know things about me. And about our past." It comes out a little more accusatory than Carly intends.

"Yeah, fair. But like. You came up maybe a handful of times in the months me and Tori have been hanging out. It's not like I ever made you a common topic of conversation."

That stings, a little. "I get it," Carly says quickly.

"Sorry, I—"

"No, it's fine," Carly insists. "Look, I like Tori a lot. She's been the best new friend I've been able to make here. And I'm not mad at how she handled this, at least, not anymore. Our shit," she gestures between them, "isn't easy for *us*, much less someone else."

Sam grins in spite of herself. "Kinda funny to hear you swear like that."

Carly chuckles, shrugging. "Swearing in English got a lot less taboo when my friends in Italy found it funny rather than scandalizing."

"I bet." And almost as soon as it opens up, Sam's expression closes off again.

Carly presses her lips together. "Sam?"

"What?"

"I'm really sorry."

Sam's brow furrows. "For what?"

"For leaving you," Carly says quietly, "For breaking your heart."

Sam shakes her head, lifting a hand between them. "You don't have to be."

“No, but I—”

“Carly, I don’t want to hear this right now,” Sam says, tone mildly sharp. But then it softens marginally. “Besides, you don’t have to be. I’m happy where I am right now.”

Carly wishes she felt happier with where she is. She is, in theory, but she also feels lonely. Isolated. Out of place. Out of her depth. In flux. She’s still finding her place in Los Angeles, and her people, but Sam has been settled here. She has roots here. She has love. All Carly can think of to say is, “I’m really happy for you.”

It comes out as hollow as she feels. Sam scrutinizes her, clearly hearing her tone, then seems to accept what she says at face value. “Thanks.”

“So then,” Carly wants to move on from this awkward moment, “What do we do?”

Sam taps her coffee cup restlessly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Carly starts, “what are the rules? For us?”

Sam looks away again. Her mouth is firm. But she has difficulty saying the next thing she says. “I’m still not ready to...be friends.”

“Okay,” Carly says, because it’s the only response that exists. It’s not as though she can change Sam’s mind. She wishes she had it in her to say she understands, or that she can respect that. Because she does, and she can. But to say it feels too hard, too much like breaking her own heart.

“But I hope if we run into each other somewhere that we can be...cool. Like, civil. Like our friends can hang out with us, and it won’t be weird, even if you and I aren’t close.”

It seems like a big ask. Carly has trouble imagining being with Tori and having Sam there, too, and things *not* feeling awkward, as polite as she and Sam act. But it’s at least a compromise. It’s middle ground. Maybe it’s a step in the right direction. “I don’t have any problem with that.”

Sam nods. “Good. I mean. I don’t have any issues with you, either, Carly.”

Carly longs to ask *then why can’t we be friends?* But she just nods, says, “Then it won’t be that weird if we’re in the same place at the same time.”

“Well,” Sam hedges, “maybe it would be weird to go to Shadow Creek Park. But if we’re at a party or something...”

“Do you guys party a lot?” Carly asks, because Tori certainly hasn’t mentioned any parties. But maybe she was just trying to keep them from Carly.

“Not since school started,” Sam admits. “But during winter break, I’ll bet we’ll all start getting together a lot more often. We partied a lot at Beck’s over the summer. Do you know him?”

Carly shakes her head. “No. Um, other than Tori and Jade, I only know Andre and, uh.” Sam looks at her expectantly, so Carly finishes, “I know *of* Cat.”

Sam nods guardedly. “Yeah. She’s... she’s everything to me,” Sam states. Her voice is plain, merely an expression of fact. Carly feels it as a pang to her chest.

“I’m really happy for you,” she repeats, this time sounding a little more genuine.

“Thanks,” Sam says again. “So, wait, how do you know Andre?”

“We have a class together,” Carly explains. “Then Tori told me he was a friend of hers and we started chatting. He’s really cute.”

“I guess,” Sam lifts a shoulder in a dismissive shrug, but then her eyes narrow slightly. “Are you into him?”

Carly huffs out a short laugh. “I don’t know. Sort of? I think he mentioned he was seeing a girl but, you know, if he were interested... I wouldn’t say no.”

She *feels* Sam react. It’s brief, and minor, but there’s a flash of *something*. Denial, maybe. Maybe something as tame as dislike, or discomfort. But then Sam’s lips lift in a strange smile. “He’s a good guy.” It’s a genuine statement, nothing underhanded about it.

“I know. Tori said the same thing.”

“Yeah, well. Tori knows how to pick friends.” Sam nods at Carly in acknowledgement.

Carly can’t help but smile at that. “She definitely does,” she tells Sam.

“So,” Sam seems to shift abruptly back to business, “we’re in agreement, then? We’re fine, just... not close?”

It’s an odd way to put it. Carly thinks that with how well they know each other, they’ll never *not* be close, not really, anyway. She and Sam can pretend all they want that they don’t know each other well, that they don’t care about each other, but Carly knows that at least she will be lying to herself.

She can only assume (*hope*) that Sam is, too.

“We’re on the same page,” is what she says, though, expressing her agreement to Sam’s weird plan.

“Good.” Sam lifts her coffee cup to her mouth and drains what’s left in it. “I’d better get home.”

Carly takes another sip of her own coffee, wincing slightly. God does she miss Italy sometimes. Sam gets up and throws her empty cup away, and Carly throws her own cup away. It’s still about half full.

They step out of the coffee shop. “Where’d you park?” Sam asks.

“I walked,” Carly explains.

“You walked?”

“Sure. I only live like a little over a mile away.” Carly gestures vaguely in the direction of her apartment.

“A mile?” Sam sounds surprised. She frowns, glancing at the evening sky. It isn’t fully dark yet, but it’s getting close. “You can’t walk a mile home in the dark.”

“It’s not dark,” Carly argues. “I’ll be home before it’s actually night. And besides. I can take care of myself.”

“I know *that*,” Sam grunts. She stands, mouth tight with frustration, before she abruptly rolls her eyes. “All right, get on.”

“What?”

“Get on my bike.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Of course I’m serious. I’m giving you a ride home.” Carly opens her mouth to protest, and Sam narrows her eyes at her and cuts her off. “And if you say you’re walking, then I’m going to ride alongside you until you get there. Which I don’t want to do because I’m hungry and Cat has dinner waiting for me at home.”

There’s long been an instinct in Carly to keep Sam fed, ever since she was a skinny kid who tried to steal Carly’s sandwich. And even if Cat is technically the person who is going to feed Sam in this situation, Carly has no intention of standing between her and a meal. It’s that, rather than the thought of how stubbornly annoying Sam would be, riding alongside her as she walks, that makes Carly decide to just hitch a ride. She sighs and starts toward Sam and her motorcycle.

“Here,” Sam pushes her helmet toward Carly.

“But this is yours.”

“Yeah, and you’re my passenger. Put it on or the bike doesn’t move.”

Carly bites back her retort, the jab she absolutely would have made if she and Sam were actually friends. But they’re not. Even though they’ve known each other half their lives and just met for coffee and Sam is insisting on giving her a ride home so that she’s safe.

Yeah, it doesn’t make sense, but it’s where they are right now.

As Carly puts the helmet on, she has a sudden flash of memories, of exactly what it’s like to fall asleep with her muzzle pressed against Sam’s fur and to wake up with her nose buried in Sam’s hair. But she can’t linger there, because Sam straddles her motorcycle and looks at her expectantly, waiting for her to get on, too.

Carly climbs onto the motorcycle. It's a bit awkward; she took a ride on the back of a Vespa once in Italy and felt as unbalanced as she does now, trying to settle onto the seat, lifting her feet up to the footrests, and shifting forward to wrap her arms around Sam's waist.

Sam looks over her shoulder at her. Carly can only see one deep blue eye as it scrutinizes her. "Do you know how to ride?"

"Not really," Carly admits quietly.

"Okay. Don't put your feet down ever. Lean against the tank if you have to lean, not on me. Turn your head in the direction I'm turning. If you need to stop, grab my leg hard."

Carly nods. "Got it."

"Okay. Tell me where to turn. I should be able to hear you."

And in a moment, the motorcycle engine roars, and they're off. Carly holds on tight to Sam, feeling the exhilaration of the world whizzing by them, of Sam's hair whipping next to her, as she calls directions in Sam's ear. Sam doesn't miss a beat, follows Carly's directions smoothly. Carly doesn't even have time to worry about Sam's lack of a helmet; Sam rides as easily as walking, as if the streets are laid out in a set path for her and only her.

Or maybe Carly is simply so overwhelmed by everything that it feels momentarily transcendental, to be holding onto Sam like this on the back of a dangerously small and speedy vehicle that leaves them both so completely exposed to all kinds of potential danger. They may be werewolves, but that doesn't mean they can't be maimed in an accident, and they're a long way from the next full moon. And maybe it's because she's a werewolf that Carly feels much safer with feet on the ground.

When Sam pulls up in front of Carly's apartment building, Carly steps off the bike. She's trembling slightly, though whether it's from the experience of riding or the proximity to Sam, she can't be certain. "Thanks for the ride," she manages as she starts toward the door to the apartment.

"Carls?" Sam calls after her. It sounds more natural this time, her old nickname falling from Sam's lips.

"Yeah?" Carly turns back around to look at her. Sam is smiling slightly, blonde hair looking radiant under a streetlamp with the backdrop of a darkening city street, blue eyes alight with pleasure. Carly's heart squeezes at the sight of her.

But all she says is, "Can I have my helmet back?"

"Oh. Right," Carly rambles slightly. "Idiot," she mutters to herself, feeling a blush as she takes off the motorcycle helmet and walks back over to hand it to Sam, who just grins as she takes it from her.

"See you later," Sam says, pulling the helmet on over her head and without another glance, she takes off down the street.

“See you,” Carly says softly to the sound of the engine growing more distant.

Carly walks into her building and up to her apartment, head still swimming with everything about this encounter with Sam. The sight of her after so many years, the familiarity and comfort of her scent.

The exhilaration of the ride home, and how it felt to be so close to Sam. To actually touch her. Even if it was literally only to keep from dying on the back of her motorcycle, not for anyone’s pleasure.

The way it felt like everything had changed, and yet nothing in Carly had. The way everything reinforced for Carly that she still loves Sam. That she’s pretty sure she never stopped.

Carly thinks again about the apology she’d tried to offer Sam, the one Sam insisted she didn’t want or need and realizes that maybe it’s an apology she needs to offer to herself, instead.

-

Giving Carly a ride home wasn’t weird. At least, that’s Sam’s take on it. Sure, Cat is generally the one who rides on the back of her motorcycle. But it’s not as though it’s been *only* Cat. It’s not like it’s inherently *romantic* to ride together on a motorcycle. Tori and Jade have both ridden with Sam before. It’s something Sam has done for a friend.

Except, she reminds herself, she and Carly aren’t even friends right now.

But it is something that requires some trust. And she has to admit that they must, at least, have that much, to be able to ride together.

It’s strange to consider. The whole afternoon encounter with Carly is something Sam mulls over on her drive home. Before, if Sam had thought about it, she would have said that there’s no way she could trust Carly after the way she’d been hurt. Not because she thought Carly was malicious or even selfish, but that she couldn’t trust Carly not to do what is best for her and for Sam to be collateral damage in the process.

But after meeting with Carly, after driving her home, Sam has to reconsider that. She *does* trust Carly. Just being in her presence was enough to remind her of that. After everything they’ve been through together, she knows Carly wants what’s best for Sam, too. It’s no one’s fault but fate if historically, sometimes what they’ve both needed didn’t align.

It had been easier to see Carly than she’d expected. Sam had prepared herself for the meeting as if she were gearing up for battle, felt ready to keep her walls high, to keep her heart hard, to not let Carly back in. And though she had communicated that directly, verbally, and meant it, it did feel to Sam as though she’d made a reconnection with Carly.

Not a deep or meaningful one. But...they’re in the same city, they know the same people. They *are* connected. It’s more factual than primal, yet...Sam also *feels* it.



It's difficult to parse out her feelings on everything. But it had been *good* to see Carly. Being face to face with her made it a lot harder to be angry with her than it had been when Sam was riding her motorcycle across the country, pouring out her feelings onto pieces of cardstock and sending them across an ocean. Any lingering anger had basically disappeared with the first of Carly's wide smiles, as if the sparkle in her dark eyes was warm enough to melt any frostiness in Sam's heart.

Sam doesn't know if she likes that Carly has such an effect on her, but it's undeniable.

Which is exactly why Sam needs to continue to keep her distance.

A part of her still loves Carly. That's a truth she's long been able to embrace, a feeling she never fought. Maybe it was due to the lack of any real closure in their relationship, but Sam has never "gotten over" Carly, not fully. She may not want to be with her anymore, because she has Cat, but part of her has always been (and maybe *will* always be) tender when it comes to Carly Shay.

But Sam isn't going to let this affect anything. She has chosen Cat Valentine to love fully and give herself to, and she will always choose Cat Valentine for the rest of her days. That seems as true and eternal to her as the fact that she may always love Carly Shay at least a little bit.

It just means Sam has to be careful.

Because if she trusts and loves Carly, if being around her for just thirty minutes makes Sam feel connected to her, then how is Sam supposed to avoid a friendship with her?

And if friendship comes that easily to them, how is Sam supposed to ignore that a sliver of herself longs for more?

She pushes that thought away. It feels like a betrayal of Cat, but more than that, a betrayal of *herself*. Sam made a promise to Cat, and Sam keeps her promises.

Which is why she isn't going to befriend Carly.

Which is why she's not going to cultivate this connection to Carly.

Which is why she is going to go home and kiss Cat thoroughly because she's so goddamn *grateful* that Cat loves her, that they found each other.

Which is exactly what she does. Sam parks her motorcycle on the patio, as usual, and comes inside to find Cat on the couch. She grins as Sam walks in, bouncing to her feet. "Dinner is still hot!" she announces, "I hope you're hungry."

In answer, Sam strides to her and tugs Cat close, bringing her in for a deep kiss. Cat squeaks against her mouth before relaxing into the kiss, humming in delight as the kiss lingers.

When they finally pull apart, Cat blinks. "What was that for?"

"Just happy I chose you," Sam says.

Cat blushes and giggles, dipping her head slightly. "Want to eat dinner?"

"Only if you're my dessert," Sam drawls suggestively.

Cat blushes even darker. "*Sam*," she admonishes in a faux-scandalized tone, eyes absolutely lighting up.

*Yeah*, Sam thinks as her sexy girlfriend serves her chicken and potatoes and green beans, *This is going to be easy*.

-

Cat is dying of curiosity.

She wants so badly to know how Sam's meeting with Carly went, but Sam doesn't seem all that interested in discussing it. At least, she hasn't brought it up, even though it's all Cat can think about, all Cat can feel in the air between them. The presence of it, the weight of it, and her need to know.

Finally, she decides to simply ask. "How did your talk with Carly go?"

Sam blinks and sits up straighter. They're eating together in the dining nook in their kitchen, sitting close enough to touch, but not so close that their elbows bump. It's easy to see the way Sam's face goes flat and her whole posture changes. "Uh, it went fine, I guess."

"What did you two talk about?" Cat presses when Sam doesn't seem inclined to elaborate.

"Um," Sam squints, like it's difficult to remember a conversation that occurred an hour or so ago. "Well, we talked about how we have some of the same friends and how it was good to just have our first meeting be planned instead of a surprise. We talked about Tori and Andre a little. We agreed that we're not friends, but if we're in the same place sometime, we can be cool."

"That's it?" Cat asks, a little surprised.

"Pretty much," Sam confirms.

"Huh."

"What?"

"I guess I just thought you two would have a lot more to talk about, seeing each other for the first time in over a year."

"Not really," Sam replies, a slight edge to her tone. "You know I just wanted to go into that meeting to clear the air. It wasn't about reconnecting with Carly or anything. Just setting some ground rules."

"I know," Cat agrees. "I just...thought it might go differently than you expected."

“Well, it didn’t,” Sam replies, that same sharpness in her voice as before.

“I can see that now,” Cat mumbles.

They’re both quiet as they continue eating, but it’s awkward now. Cat doesn’t understand why. She’d just been curious about something that Sam had given her every indication was entirely her business. Sam had always been pretty open with her about Carly. Open for Sam, anyway. But Sam clearly doesn’t want to talk about whatever happened with Carly.

Abruptly, Cat remembers the way Sam had kissed her when she first got home, the proclamation of being happy she’d chosen Cat. It hadn’t felt weird at the time; Sam can be affectionate, but she usually initiates affection with a smirk and a suggestive comment, not an out of the blue kiss that leaves Cat breathless. Though she certainly has her moments in which she just seems to want to remind Cat of how much she loves her.

But given the context, and the fact that Sam is now being so closed off about her meeting with Carly (*and given that Cat knows she still loves her*), Cat has to wonder if that kiss had been more performative, or had been Sam’s way of seeking absolution for something.

Sam gathers their dishes after they eat to rinse them and put them in the dishwasher while Cat starts soaking the cookware in the sink. As she’s filling up a baking dish with hot soapy water, Sam comes up behind her, arms slipping around Cat’s body, mouth pressing kisses to her shoulder. “Still thinking about dessert?” she asks near Cat’s ear.

“Only if that’s what you really want,” Cat replies, a little dully. She’s still stuck on the aborted dinner conversation, the awkwardness of the end of their meal, the way it feels sometimes like she’ll always be living under Carly Shay’s shadow, and how she can’t help but worry sometimes that Sam’s promise, Sam’s choice, is standing in the way of what she really wants.

Sam pulls back slightly. “Of course it’s what I want. Are you...okay?” she asks tentatively.

“Sam,” Cat turns in her arms. “Wasn’t it...hard to see Carly?”

Sam’s expression turns stoic again. “You want to talk about Carly right now?” she asks incredulously.

Cat throws up her hands. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to think! You come back from a meeting with your ex. You don’t want to talk about it. And all you want to do is get physical with me. And I’m supposed to think it has nothing to do with her?”

“It *doesn’t*,” Sam insists. She’s already backed away from Cat, almost too quickly for Cat to make sense of, until she’s leaning against the kitchen island, eyes averted. “At least...not in the way that you think,” she amends in a softer voice.

“Then what’s going on?” Cat asks, almost pleads. “I just want you to be honest with me.”

“I am.” Sam meets her eyes. “I haven’t lied to you. I just...” She looks away again.

“Come sit with me,” Cat requests, grabbing a bag of cookies to feed Sam while they talk on the couch, as incentive, or maybe a reward.

Sam sits next to her on the couch and immediately takes a cookie, munching on it before finally speaking. “It wasn’t hard to see Carly,” she finally admits. “It was *easy*. It was like...I saw her, and I couldn’t be mad anymore.”

“That’s understandable,” Cat replies.

Sam shakes her head. “I mean, my anger has been fading for a long time. Since I met you, really.” They share a brief smile at the memory of their early connection. “But it was still different, seeing her.”

“You two were really close,” Cat offers as Sam seems to lapse into thought.

“I know,” Sam agrees, “And I don’t want to be anymore. But Cat...” she starts, then pauses, seeming to choose her words. “I also gave her a ride home.”

“Oh. Did her car break down?”

“No. She walked to the coffee shop. And I didn’t want her to walk home in the dark.”

“I wouldn’t want that, either,” Cat agrees. “You did the right thing.”

“Yeah, but. Seeing her, and doing her that favor made me realize, as much as I don’t want to be her friend, it’s going to be hard to not feel *close* to her, if I’m ever around her.”

Cat thinks about Sam’s admission that seeing Carly had been easy, that she’d been inclined to do her a friendly favor, that she seemed to feel some sort of affection for her. And the fact that Cat knows Sam still loves her. “So what does that mean?” Cat asks.

Sam shrugs. “I guess it just means it’s really important to keep my distance.”

Cat scrutinizes her. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“Yes,” Sam insists without a moment’s hesitation.

“Then,” Cat starts hesitantly, “why didn’t you want to tell me about meeting with Carly?”

Sam reaches for her hands. “I just don’t want you to worry.”

“I’m not worried. Not normally, anyway. But when it feels like you’re keeping things from me, that’s when I start to feel funny.”

Sam hangs her head. “I just know that you know...how I still feel about Carly, a little bit. And I know you read that postcard from over the summer about how she felt back then. I just don’t want you to think that because it was kind of nice to see Carly that it *means* anything. Because it doesn’t.”

“I believe you,” Cat replies, though a part of her thinks that Sam’s insistence, Sam’s initial hesitance to talk, means something. Not that she thinks anything *happened*. She trusts Sam, completely.

But Cat worries that Sam is downplaying what she wants, even to herself, as she attempts to reassure Cat.

“You know I’m okay with it if you and Carly want to be friends,” Cat reminds Sam. She’d said as much when they’d first discussed Sam’s meeting with Carly, and Cat still feels the same way. But Sam can’t seem to understand or accept that Cat isn’t threatened by a friendship between her and Carly.

“But *I’m* not okay,” Sam says quickly.

Cat frowns. “Why not?”

Sam shakes her head and doesn’t respond for a long moment. Finally, she says, “Because the more I look back on our friendship, the more it was built on...me loving her. For a lot longer than we dated. And I don’t know if I can get that close to her again without feeling that.”

It’s a bold admission, one that makes Cat thrum with anxiety, even though she’s able to rationalize it pretty quickly. She wants to tell Sam that she knows Sam already loves Carly, that it’s *okay* for her to feel that, but she thinks she understands. For Sam, it’s less about the *feeling* of being in love, and more about the *action* of it. Being devoted to Carly in friendship meant acting on her love, every day, in the guise of friendship. It meant the two of them creating their own love language, in their secret relationship with only an outward friendship on display. Cat can understand that, for Sam, being best friends with Carly means being in love with her, and the two concepts are inextricably bound.

Cat supposes that, in that context, she can understand why friendship would feel like a dangerous thing to consider.

Cat draws Sam close to her. She can’t think of what to say in response as they sit together, Sam quietly eating a cookie as Cat holds her.

Finally, Sam seems to shake off the conversation entirely. “I guess this talk killed my mood a little.”

Cat smirks. “Maybe I can help you with that,” she drawls coyly.

Sam’s head lifts, like a dog’s ears perking up. “Yeah?” she asks.

In answer, Cat kisses her. And as Sam grows more amorous in response to Cat’s attention, it feels completely different from before, when Sam’s romantic overtures felt like she was compensating for something. Now, Cat feels as though Sam is entirely, singularly focused on her.

And when sex is over, and they’re half-dressed on the couch, Cat halfway on top of Sam as they both catch their breath, their clothes scattered around the room, Cat is certain of two

things: sex with Sam has only gotten better since Cat has shed the last vestiges of her virginity, and there's not a part of Sam that thinks of anyone else when she makes love to Cat.

## Clouds/Hatred

When Tori had first decided on spending two nights in Shadow Creek Park every full moon, to give equal time to both Sam and Carly, it had seemed quite manageable. Maybe not extremely convenient, but possible.

This November, though, the full moon falls on Saturday through Monday. And it's the week before Thanksgiving break, so it's a busy upcoming week of school. And Tori's going to have to spend at least one school night as a wolf.

Still, that's something she's used to, at least. For as long as she's been changing, she's had to contend with the inconvenience of human world obligations making the necessity of time spent as a wolf feel disruptive.

She's on the phone with Jade a couple of nights before the full moon, trying to coordinate with Sam and Carly via (separate) text messages, when another snag makes itself known.

"So, when am *I* going to get to spend time with you this weekend?" Jade asks pointedly.

Tori deflates, already feeling the pressure of a booked weekend. "We still have Friday night," she says.

"Uh, barely," Jade grumbles, "because that's the night I have to work on that project with Chandra."

Tori winces. "Right. I forgot. But you can come to my house afterwards."

"Yeah, because literally *sleeping* together is actual quality time," Jade gripes.

"Look, I'm sorry," Tori replies, trying to sound remorseful and not snappish. "But I don't have another solution. Sam and I are doing Saturday night, and then Carly and I are going to go Sunday night because then in the morning we can just carpool to school. And then Monday I'll have to take wolfsbane and catch up on any homework I don't finish Sunday. Which will probably be most of it."

"Really makes a girl feel special to know she's your last priority," Jade drawls pointedly.

"You're *not*!"

"Well, it sure doesn't feel like it sometimes."

"Jade—"

"Tori, I get it," Jade interrupts, "I know you need to get out, I know that being able to bond with Sam and Carly this way is...special," the word comes out a little forced, like Jade doesn't actually want to say it. "But they're not the only ones who like getting to spend time

with you as a wolf. And if this is the way full moons have to be, then I'm never going to get my turn. And that's a raw deal, considering."

She's right, and Tori knows it. Tori hadn't considered that Jade would miss this as much as she does, considering she always has a chance to play with Tori in the park, and, let's face it, the two of them often have more fun on the nights Tori takes wolfsbane, anyway. But she thinks about how it had felt, in the early days of their blossoming connection, when she'd cuddle up next to Jade in bed as a wolf, the way Jade would curl up close, wrap an arm around her, and let Tori keep her warm all night.

With college already keeping them apart more often than they'd both like, they'd let this aspect of their intimacy fall by the wayside a little. Tori hadn't considered how that might make Jade feel, because Jade has always been so on board for Shadow Creek Park nights, valuing the time she gets to bond with Cat. But enjoying one aspect of their full moon ritual doesn't make her not miss a different one.

Tori wonders how long Jade has been stewing about this. This is sometimes the problem with dating Jade. Sometimes, she lets things fester until she can't hold back anymore, and as well as Tori knows her at this point, she can't always anticipate the things that will set Jade off.

"You're right," Tori says heavily, "and I'm sorry. I really am."

There's silence on the other end of the phone. "That's it?"

Tori feels helpless. "I've already set plans with Sam and Carly. I don't think I can change them now. They're counting on me."

"And I'm not?"

"I'll make it up to you," Tori pleads. "Give me some time to figure something out. I love you so much, but Jade, I can't work on things until I know what they *are*."

As hotheaded and stubborn as Jade can sometimes be, she's a little more reasonable than she was through most of high school. But Tori can almost hear her roll her eyes. "Fine. Do your weekend with your friends. But figure it out, Tori. Because sometimes I think you forget that I need you, too."

"I never forget that," Tori says quietly. "I just don't always know *how* you need me."

"Well, now you know," Jade says succinctly. "It's getting late. I still have some work to do before I go to bed."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Sure. Good night."

"I love you."

There's a pause, as if Jade is considering not replying, but then she says, "I love you, too." And it's genuine, even if it's punctuated by Jade disconnecting the call immediately



afterwards.

Tori knows she's on thin ice.

Still, as annoyed as Jade clearly is, she shows up as planned late Friday night, when she and Tori, as predicted, don't get to do much more than actually go to sleep together. They do get to spend some time together on Saturday during the day, which seems to placate Jade (the discreet afternoon sex they have, trying not to be overheard by Trina, probably contributes to the improvement in Jade's mood). But the days are getting shorter, so between sleeping in, watching a movie, and sex, it really feels like she and Jade don't get much time together before Sam and Cat arrive so that the four of them can share a quick meal before heading to the park.

But by the time Jade is driving them all up to Shadow Creek Park, she's back to being a bit prickly again. She grumbles about the drive, pointedly comments about how she's glad she won't have to come here again tomorrow, but is otherwise mostly quiet.

Some degree of grouchiness is normal enough for Jade, though, that Tori doesn't think it registers much with their friends. Cat seems to be her usual chipper self, and Sam seems so excited about the prospect of running around in the park that she probably isn't paying attention to Jade's moodiness. Tori figures it's probably a display for her own benefit, anyway, to remind her that Jade isn't happy with the state of things, and that Tori needs to find a solution. So she offers her own quiet reassurances as best she can, mostly in the form of a gentle hand on Jade's knee as she drives (which prompts Jade to scowl at her sullenly in response, but Tori can see that she's fighting a smile). Even when she's in a rotten mood, Tori never doubts that Jade loves her.

When they make it to the park, she and Sam go into the trees, as usual, but Tori realizes Sam isn't as oblivious as she'd assumed. "What's up with Jade?" Sam asks as they undress.

"Oh, she's...just being Jade," Tori replies, stalling as she tries to figure out how much she actually wants to share about the small fight they'd had.

"I dunno," Sam replies doubtfully. "Her, like, constant irritation is always kinda balanced out by joy when she's around you. But today I could feel, like, discontent coming off her. Strong."

"Well, first of all, never tell her you can feel that she's secretly joyful with me or she'll be depressed for weeks," Tori chuckles.

"Yeah, yeah, just like you two never call me out for being soft with Cat, I get it."

Tori's smiling, both at her happiness for her friends' relationship, and the idea that Sam can tell so easily how much Jade loves her. But then, that means she could also tell that Jade isn't happy today. Tori had kind of assumed she'd been the only one picking up on that because she's so attuned to Jade, just generally. It's not like her human nose is a *perfect* instrument for reading someone's mood, and she knows Sam's isn't either. Body language cues, just the regular human interaction kind, also provide a lot of context for that sort of thing, just like

they do for wolves in the wild. But Jade's frustration must've been potent enough to pique Sam's attention.

"But something's up with Jade," Sam prompts again, pausing before she takes off her pants to regard Tori seriously.

Tori sighs. "She's...a little upset with the way full moons are turning out to be. With you and I having a night, and then Carly and I, and then I can't really spare another night to be with her, especially not when the sun sets so early and I have so much homework."

"Oh."

Tori isn't sure why Sam's reaction irritates her. Maybe because it's so lacking. Sam is the one who brought this up, and now she doesn't want to discuss Jade's mood? "I *love* coming here, but Jade has a point. It's kind of a lot having to do this twice in a month."

"If you don't want to do this anymore, just tell me," Sam replies in a firm voice. Tori can feel her closing off. She's hurt, and Tori can feel that, too.

"I didn't say that *at all*," she counters, now frustrated with Sam. "I just told you I love coming here. And being here with you is part of what's important to me. *You're* important to me."

"That's gay," Sam smirks.

Tori rolls her eyes, "You're such an idiot."

"Hey, I wish I could be different. I wish that Carly and I were in a place where...you'd only have to do this once. But we're not." Sam sounds wistful.

"I get it. I'm not asking that of you. But I have to figure something out, and I'm not sure what I'm going to decide yet."

"Well, let me know if...if I need to start making other plans sometimes."

Tori bites her lip. "I will. I hope I can figure something out, but..." she trails off, knowing there might not *be* anything to figure out. She might have to switch off months with Carly and Sam or something, to make sure she has enough time for her relationship. Especially since the next few months are probably going to have full moon nights that all fall on school nights. Well, except December, since it will be winter break.

She and Sam don't really discuss it any more. A tinge of awkwardness hangs in the air, heightening the reality that this monthly friendship outing, this wolf bonding that they've both come to regard as important, may not be such a regular occurrence anymore. It's frustrating for Tori, too, because while she feels that her loyalty lies with Sam, because of their longer history and because of certain things they've faced and overcome together, she also can't discard Carly completely. Especially because Carly *has* no one else. Sam at least has Cat, but Tori is the only other person in Los Angeles that has seen Carly as a wolf. Well, other than Sam, of course, but therein lies the whole problem.

But it's not just obligation to Carly that makes Tori want to spend time with her. It's because she *likes* Carly. The friendship is new, but it feels promising. And after all the years Tori spent watching their webshow, she can't deny that it's *exciting* to befriend Carly. Maybe it's a bit selfish, in a way, this desire to befriend Carly. But it isn't only obligation or selfishness. Tori wants a closer friendship with Carly just because she's Carly, and, as all friendships are, her friendship with Tori is different from Tori's other ones. Tori thinks that alone is worth cultivating.

And, of course, Tori's relationship with Jade is the most important one of all. Which is why Jade gets most of her free time. Tori knows that Jade can be jealous and irrational, though she's generally been pretty reasonable with Tori. She's never been weird about Tori spending time with friends before. But maybe she's feeling squeezed out by Tori's werewolf friends, who share something with her that Jade cannot. Whatever the case, Tori is taking Jade's feelings seriously, and if Jade needs more full moon time with her, Tori wants to give that to her.

These thoughts all begin to fade away, though, as she and Sam start changing, and Tori's world comes alive with new scents and sounds that she could only access partially before, with her human senses. Sam's tail is already wagging as soon as it appears, and with that, the awkwardness that had been between them before dissolves like so many other human concerns, to be replaced by the wolfish desire for play and closeness.

They race out of the trees to their lovers. Cat is immediately all over Sam, hugging her and scratching her fur, but Jade is palpably more subdued. Tori stops just in front of her, wagging her tail solicitously, leaning forward to sniff at Jade's palm.

Jade is smiling, though there's something dour in her demeanor, too. But she does reach forward to scratch Tori behind the ears, and eventually crouches down to let Tori nuzzle at her neck, and Tori feels her fingers threading through the fur on her back, feels her nails scratching at Tori's skin delicately. It feels *wonderful*, both the way she's being petted, and to be so close to Jade, who smells so *good*, and whose presence makes Tori feel so cherished.

But Jade's mood seems to impact things, because she and Cat play with Tori and Sam much less tonight, before Jade finally says, "Cat and I had better get going. We have some things to do."

Tori's ears droop in disappointment.

"We do?" Cat questions.

"Yeah, I had those movies I wanted to show you, remember?"

"The ones you have to watch for school?" Cat asks doubtfully.

"Exactly," Jade's tone is mildly stern. "So we should probably go."

"Okay," Cat says reluctantly, then turns to kneel down and wrap her arms around Sam again, a goodbye that looks almost exactly the same as her greeting when Sam first emerged from the forest, but with a completely different disposition.

Tori stares at Jade, feeling hurt, and Jade offers her a sad smile and crouches down to be eye level with her again. “Hey, I just want you to get to go have a good time with your friend, like I’m going to, too,” she tells Tori quietly. Tori whimpers in response, clearly expressing that she doesn’t want Jade to go yet, and Jade lifts a hand to scratch behind her ears gently. “I’ll be back in the morning,” she says softly, “I just...I just need a little time, okay?”

It doesn’t make sense. Tori hates that it feels so clear that something is wrong, but that she can’t do anything as a wolf to make Jade speak to her. So instead, she pushes her muzzle against Jade’s chest, rubbing her face against her. Jade seems a little surprised and chuckles softly, but it’s not a sexual thing, like it usually is when Tori has her face in Jade’s breasts. Tori is seeking comfort, connection, attempting to remind Jade of the love they share.

She knows that Jade can feel it, that Jade knows, but she still just offers Tori a wistful smile and leaves with Cat, while Tori stares after her.

She howls softly when Jade’s car starts to drive away.

Sam is there in a moment, whimpering in sympathy, nosing at Tori, coaxing Tori back to their present, to the fact of the two of them together in Shadow Creek Park, to the potential of a night together. Tori nips at Sam, and it’s initially an irritated impulse, but it quickly turns playful, and the two of them begin to romp around the scrappy desert wilderness, enjoying each others’ company, and Tori manages to put Jade out of her mind.

Not completely. *Never* completely. But the kinds of human anxieties that keep people up at night just don’t plague her as a wolf in the same way.

She and Sam enjoy the night until they begin to get tired, then go to sleep in the trees. At dawn, the ritual is largely the same as it always is, with Jade and Cat picking them up soon after they change, a trip to the diner for a hearty breakfast and a lot of coffee, and then Jade drives them back to Tori’s house, and they part ways as Sam and Cat mount Sam’s motorcycle and prepare to head back to Venice.

Despite all the coffee they just drank, they’re both pretty exhausted, so they head upstairs to lie down in Tori’s bed. But Tori doesn’t really fall asleep as she cuddles up next to Jade, head on her shoulder, Jade’s arm wrapped around her as they relax together.

“Jade?” Tori murmurs after a while.

“Hmm?” Jade asks, revealing that she, too, hasn’t fallen asleep.

“I’m really sorry,” she whispers. Tears are starting, maybe because she’s so tired, maybe because of the chaotic power of the moon. But Tori is crying silently, knowing Jade is upset and not knowing what to do about it.

Jade squeezes her close. “Tori, it’s fine,” she mumbles.

“I don’t want to lose—”

“You won’t,” Jade replies firmly.

But Tori has a feeling that's Jade's stubbornness talking, more than any actual promise about the status of their relationship. Even when Jade admits something is wrong, she doesn't want to acknowledge the severity of her feelings on it. "I'll make it right," Tori promises.

"I know you will," Jade replies, tone a little dry, "That's why I'm not worried."

In a way, Jade's reassurance is sweet. In a way, Tori knows that it's ultimately good, that they've talked about an issue and that they're working to resolve it.

But she blinks away tears for a long time as she snuggles up against Jade in bed, until Jade is softly breathing, deeply asleep.

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Sam had already kind of planned to have a wolfsbane night that night, because she has homework to finish, but she'd also decided she has something else she needs to accomplish tonight, too.

As dusk approaches, she lets Cat know that she needs to go see Jade for a little bit. Cat is a bit distracted with her own pile of homework, so she just cheerfully tells Sam to have fun and offers her a kiss, and doesn't ask to accompany her. Which is good, because Sam needs to do this alone.

She rides across town to Jade's house. She hasn't spent much time there, but she knows where Jade lives, mostly from dropping by briefly over the summer. She parks in the driveway and rings the bell, and Jade's mother answers.

"Oh, um. Hi, Ms. West," Sam greets awkwardly. She's met Jade's mom in passing a few times, but as with most parents, Sam is wary of her, even though she's only ever been kind.

"Oh, hi. You're here for Jade?" It's a rhetorical question, because Jade's mom steps aside to let Sam in, then calls toward the staircase down to the half basement, "Jade! Your friend is here!"

"Who?" Jade calls back, sounding irritated.

"Sam," Sam supplies in explanation.

"I thought so, thank you, honey," replies Jade's mom, then calls, "It's Sam!"

"Sam?" Jade sounds surprised.

"Go on down," Ms. West gestures toward the staircase.

"Thanks," Sam replies, hurrying in that direction.

When she gets to the bottom of the stairs, Jade is standing in the doorway to her room, looking a little surprised to see her. She's dressed casually, in a loose long-sleeved top and shorts, an outfit that looks like it's probably pajamas, if Sam had to guess. Which makes sense. Sam had purposely chosen this time, knowing that Tori would already be at Shadow

Creek Park with Carly, and assuming that Jade would be at home doing homework, like almost everyone else seems to be doing tonight.

“Hey,” Sam lifts a hand in greeting.

Jade raises her eyebrows and folds her arms. “Hey,” she replies evenly. “What are you doing here?” she asks directly.

“Wanted to talk.”

Jade looks skeptical, but walks into her room, and Sam takes the implicit invitation to follow her inside. The room is just as Sam remembers, with dark furniture and decor, strange odds and ends everywhere. Jade takes a seat on her red armchair, crossing her legs under her and taking a sip from the coffee cup next to her. Sam takes a seat at Jade’s desk, where homework is spread out next to an open PearBook. “Let’s talk, then,” Jade suggests, eyeing Sam uncertainly.

“Is it really so weird for me to drop by to hang out?” Sam asks, deflecting slightly, but also commenting on the less than warm welcome she’s receiving from her friend. Really, her first close friend here, other than Cat, with whom even friendship had always been a little bit complicated.

“Yes. Especially without even giving me a heads up, on a school night. So what do you want?”

“Wanted to talk to you about Tori.”

Jade’s expression tightens, and Sam can feel a mix of conflicting emotions. “What about her?”

“She and I talked a little last night. I know you’ve been upset.”

Jade sighs, heavily. “This is between me and Tori. It’s not really any of your business.”

“It *is* my business, because it affects my friendship with Tori.”

Jade scowls. “If you’re here to tell me I’m being selfish and ridiculous, you can stop. I already *know* that. I *know*. But I can’t help how I feel and all I’m doing is asking Tori to—to give me a little more of her time.”

Sam blinks. “I wasn’t going to say that to you.”

Jade looks surprised. “You weren’t?”

“No. I always kinda thought that you’re allowed to be a little selfish in relationships?” She phrases it as a question, because even as she says it, she’s not sure that it’s true. “I mean, as long as you’re not being, like, manipulative, or something.”

Jade looks away. “I hope I’m not,” she admits. “But I don’t always know I’m being an asshole until a lot later.”

“Look, I get it,” Sam tells her. “Getting to spend wolf time with Cat means a lot to me, too. But I also get that it means something to Tori to get to spend time with other wolves.”

“And I don’t want to take that away from her,” Jade reassures. She shakes her head. “I don’t know. Maybe I *am* just being selfish. There’s only so much full moon to go around. And I know I’ve made her feel bad, and that’s not what I want. I just. I just don’t know how to *be* when I feel hurt and left out and for whatever reason, *that’s* how I’ve been feeling.”

“Well,” Sam says confidently, “I don’t want you to worry. I’m going to handle this.”

Jade looks skeptical. “*You’re* going to handle this? It’s between me and Tori.”

“No, it’s between me and *Carly*,” Sam corrects. She looks away, taking a breath. “Really, when it comes down to it all, it’s because of me being weird with Carly that you’re getting less time with Tori. And that’s my fault. Carly would probably be fine hanging out, I’m the one who’s not. So since it’s my fault...” Sam trails off. “I’m just gonna, I’m gonna take a step back. Tori can do the park with Carly. I’ll just hang with Cat until I figure out how to handle my shit with Carly. But the last thing I want is to get between you and Tori because I have a weird thing about my ex. *That’s* selfish.”

Jade looks uncertain, unhappy. “I don’t like this,” she announces. “It doesn’t feel right.”

Sam shrugs. “It’s not really what I want, either. I love my time with Tori in the park. But like I said, if I’m the one with a problem, then I should steer clear. Like if Tori had a party and wanted to invite both Carly and I, she shouldn’t have to choose. We should be the ones who’d have to choose if we wanted to be there when the other one is.”

Jade looks interested. “Would you *not* attend that kind of party?”

Sam hesitates. “I probably would,” she admits. “But a party is easier than, like, a night in the park with just two other wolves. I could work around Carly at a party.”

Jade’s mouth looks firm, and she doesn’t look pleased, but ultimately, she shrugs. “If that’s what you think you have to do...” she trails off.

“I haven’t told Tori yet. Figure I’ll just tell her I have other plans next full moon so she can do what she needs to do and make sure she has time with you. But I wanted to tell you. Because I can tell how upset you are, and you don’t need to be. I’m handling this.”

“I don’t really like that you’re coming in and trying to solve a problem between my girlfriend and I,” Jade says. “But...I’m okay with it because it sounds like I’m gonna get what I want.”

“I knew you’d understand,” Sam grins.

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Talking to Sam hadn’t changed anything, not really, but it does make Jade a little more optimistic. Not that she’d ever admit to optimism.

That had been enough to prompt her to reconsider her distance from Tori that evening, though. Sure, she has homework. And sure, her presence at Shadow Creek Park isn't strictly *necessary*, not now that Tori can drive herself there.

But maybe it prompts Jade to consider the fact that, if distance from Tori is what she's upset about, then staying away from Tori isn't solving anything. Even though taking two back to back trips to Shadow Creek Park in a single weekend isn't how Jade would prefer to spend her time, anyway.

She drives up to Shadow Creek Park. It's definitely nighttime, which Jade certainly prefers over driving at dawn and dusk, as she so often has to when she comes up here. The roads are always so empty along this stretch, but it feels even eerier at this time of night, when she's completely alone. But Jade likes eerie. She feels at home in the ambiance, almost as comfortable as she feels driving up and parking next to Tori's car at Shadow Creek Park.

"It's me," she calls as she gets out of the car. She has to assume that Tori and Carly noticed her arrival; the flat stretch of road that leads up to the park makes an approaching car very difficult to miss, especially in the dark. "I'm alone," she follows up with, aware that they can probably smell this fact, but seeking to reassure them, anyway.

Jade starts into the park slowly, looking around, eyes adjusting to the moonlight now that her car headlights are off. There is some cloud cover over the moon, making it a bit difficult to see, but there's enough light that Jade can make out the shape of two lupine figures emerging from the cover of the trees in the middle of the park. She hears a low barking sound, like a greeting, before the two figures hurry toward her.

Until they get close, Jade can't distinguish them, because unlike Tori and Sam, they're very similar in color, mostly brown fur like typical wolves that fades into silvery colors further down their bodies, but before Jade can note the differences between them, the wolf that is obviously Tori jumps up at her, whining, tail wagging.

Jade laughs, catching her paws briefly before letting them go, leaning down to get close to Tori's level to pet her vigorously. "Hey," she says quietly, "I just missed you, thought I'd check in with you both."

Tori's tail is wagging so hard that Jade thinks her whole back end seems like it's in danger of lifting off the ground. Carly's tail is wagging, too, and she approaches Jade with more caution, sniffing her curiously.

"Hey, Carly," Jade greets her, holding out a hand for her to sniff, which she does, then butts her head against Jade's palm. Jade pets Carly a few times, too, then suggests, "You guys want to chase some toys?"

Tori yips excitedly, Carly's head tilts to the side with interest, and Jade goes to her trunk to pick out something she might throw for them.

She plays with the wolves for a little while, perhaps a bit longer than she'd stayed the other night with Sam. She remembers, with a pang of guilt, how Cat had tried to talk to her that night about why Jade had left early, had been acting so strangely, but Jade had insisted she



just wanted to watch a movie and hang out with Cat and Cat hadn't pressed. Cat isn't a pushover, Jade knows that, but she chooses her moments more carefully, and hadn't chosen that one. Instead, Sam had come in to give Jade the push she needed to rethink some things. Maybe that's why the two of them are such a good match. There is balance.

Jade hopes she and Tori have such a balance, too. Tori can be naive sometimes, a little too bright-eyed, and Jade's cynicism cancels some of that out, keeps Tori safe, or spots issues Tori needs to address, as in the case with her friendship with Carly. But Jade tends to keep things in, to let things fester, and Tori often doesn't let her get away with not talking about things, either because she brings them up directly, or because her own openness encourages Jade's.

Jade feels safer, more understood, and more at ease in her relationship with Tori than she ever thought was possible in a romance. She supposes that means they're doing something right. And even though Tori can't speak at the moment, Jade has a sense, from her reaction, that Jade's decision to come out to the park tonight means a lot to Tori.

Maybe that's another way they're well-matched. Both of them know the value of a meaningful, dramatic gesture. And Jade expressing so clearly that she wants to be with Tori, homework and school night sleep schedule be damned...that means something to them both.

When it begins to get late, though, Jade has to put away the dog toys. "I'd better get home. Still have a bit of work to do before bed," she informs the two of them. She leans over to give Carly a brief pet on the head. "Good to see you, Carly," then turns to Tori, squatting down to hug her and scratch her behind the ears. "I'll meet you two for breakfast in the morning," she suggests. Tori pulls back, whining in her throat, as if suggesting Jade shouldn't, but Jade isn't backing down from what she wants. If she wants Tori to make more room for her in her life, Jade needs to offer Tori the same thing. "Don't worry. I'll get some sleep. See you in the morning."

Jade leaves the park that night feeling good. Almost happy. It's enough that she knows it's the right decision.

She and Tori don't really get to talk about it much until after breakfast with Carly. When Carly excuses herself to the restroom just before it's time to leave, Jade and Tori wait in the parking lot for her, and take the opportunity to speak privately.

"I'm really glad you came last night, and this morning," Tori tells her. Her smile alone is enough to make Jade feel warm.

"Me, too," Jade replies.

"I just thought you were still mad at me," Tori reveals, voice soft as if she's afraid actually speaking this aloud will make Jade suddenly remember to be angry again.

"I was. Sort of. Sam talked to me and I guess I realized that if I'm mad about not seeing enough of you, I could at least do something about it."

Tori's brow furrows at the mention of Sam, but she doesn't address it. "I'm still planning to figure out how to prioritize you," Tori promises.

Jade kisses her, a reassurance. "I know. But I've got to pull my weight, too. And even if being in the park with you and Carly isn't at all the same as snuggling with you and watching a movie...I'm glad I showed up."

"Me, too," Tori grins. She wraps her arms around Jade, sighing into her shoulder contentedly.

They're still holding onto each other when Carly emerges; Jade notices her out of the corner of her eye, but Tori must sense her otherwise, because she pulls back and grins at Carly.

"Ready to go?"

"No, wait, don't let me interrupt," Carly smiles at them. "It's nice to see you two so snoodly."

Tori offers Jade a final squeeze and a big kiss on the cheek before pulling away. "I'll talk to you later?"

"Definitely," Jade agrees.

That night, Tori surprises Jade by coming over. She's taken wolfsbane, and she brings a pile of homework with her, so it isn't exactly the coupley full moon evening Jade has been missing, but doing homework together beats doing homework apart. At least, tonight it does. Jade knows she'd be too distracted to do homework with Tori every night, and Tori has expressed that it's harder to focus in Jade's room than her own, but they enjoy each others' company, and even have a pretty steamy makeout session before going to sleep together.

Jade appreciates Tori's return gesture, though, and feels like they're working together on finding a solution.

It's good that they spent extra time together that weekend, though, because the rest of the week is busy, and even the following weekend is hectic. The week of Thanksgiving may only be two days long, but both of them have projects due in that very short week. Honestly, Jade welcomes Thanksgiving break less for the holiday and more for a chance to breathe just before the semester ends.

The holiday is predictable: dinner with her mom's side of the family, which is at least more tolerable than her dad's side, though Jade tires quickly of trying to talk to her grandparents about school, because they clearly don't understand a single thing about film school. Luckily, Jade has the excuse of being expected at Tori's house for dessert to allow her to make her escape before things get excruciating. She stays the night at Tori's, happy for the chance to spend some time together, since much of the rest of the short break ends up devoted to school work.

That ends up being par for the course for the last two weeks of the semester, as projects and tests pile up. Jade feels like she barely keeps up, even though she's always been a good student, she's passionate about film, and she came into her program already knowing a fair amount. It's *still* a lot of work.

She's glad she and Tori aren't still fighting, because they barely have time for each other until school lets out.

With the ending of their first college semester, though, comes a sudden influx of free time. Jade barely has time to acclimate to the idea before Beck announces that he's throwing a party that Friday night, literally their first day of freedom, celebrating the end of school.

In the group chat, Jade challenges him that he isn't even *in* school, but then Beck counters by saying he and Robbie have both missed everyone so much that they're celebrating school being out because it means they might actually see their friends. Jade rolls her eyes, but she doesn't fight Beck on this one. It *is* going to be nice to spend time with everyone, because Jade has barely seen Beck, Robbie or even Andre since she started college.

"This is going to be so fun!" Tori enthuses as she gets dressed in her bedroom.

Jade sits on her bed and watches her, smiling at her excitement and the unselfconscious way she rummages through her closet in her bra and jeans. Damn, but Tori always looks so good. Except when she wears goofy, nerdy things like... "No, not that blazer," Jade interjects.

Tori pouts at her. "But I just got it, and it has these cool patches on the chest!" She pulls it on to pose in it, showing them off.

Jade rolls her eyes, fighting a smile. "Okay, if you *have* to dress like a hot nerd, at least wear *something* I can stand to look at you in."

Tori smirks, and straddles Jade's lap, gazing down at her with a heated expression. "You like to look at me no matter what I wear," she accuses playfully.

"Or what you *don't* wear," Jade replies, lifting her hand to run fingers over the bare skin of Tori's abdomen, just beneath the bra she is wearing under the blazer.

Tori winks, "Play your cards right, and you might see a *lot* more of what I don't wear later tonight."

"Planning on getting horny drunk?" Jade teases.

"Maybe horny high," Tori grins lazily.

"Tell you what, you focus on getting 'horny high' and I'll focus on being tonight's designated driver," Jade drawls. She doesn't mind being the designated driver, though she wouldn't want to do it every time. But sometimes sitting out from indulging is a better choice for her. Weed sometimes makes her paranoid and beer sometimes makes her grouchy. Jade's emotions—especially her darker ones—are already too deeply felt without the aid of substances, so sometimes having the excuse to take the night off from them helps.

Other times, it's totally worth it to just indulge and see what happens.

"You do that," Tori agrees, climbing off of Jade's lap to return her attention to her closet. "But if you happen to need to get 'horny high' yourself, I bet we could convince Andre to give us a ride home."

Jade snorts, “Not if he’s passed out on Beck’s floor.” That was typically Andre’s strategy on nights he wasn’t supposed to be designated driver.

“He’s sober tonight, too,” Tori reveals. “Because of Carly.”

Jade frowns. “Carly?”

“Yeah. He invited her to the party, before I even had a chance to.”

Tori sounds unconcerned, but Jade knows her well enough to know that doesn’t mean she’s thought this through. “Does Sam know?” Jade feels a little bit responsible for Sam, since she and Cat are meeting at Tori’s so Jade can drive them all to the party. They’ll stay the night on Tori’s couches after the party so they don’t have to drive themselves back to Venice.

Tori glances at her and nods. “She knows. She says she’s fine with it.”

But Jade has another thought, remembering Carly’s bisexuality, and the fact that she’d called Andre cute. “Are she and Andre coming...together?”

Tori bobs her head back and forth uncertainly. “I don’t think either of them are sure?”

“Huh.”

“Yeah.”

“Does Sam know they might be coming *together* together?”

“She knows they’re coming together,” Tori replies with a note of finality. “That’s all anybody seems to know.”

*Huh*, indeed.

But when Sam and Cat arrive, it’s easy enough to forget about Carly, because the two of them are excited, and the four of them have weeks worth of catching up to do. They chat about the end of their semesters as Jade drives them to Beck’s house, and the topic of Carly doesn’t come up once for the whole drive.

They arrive first, and Beck and Robbie greet them with enthusiastic hugs. Jade even accepts one from Robbie, though she makes a show of being begrudging about it. Her hug with Beck, though, lasts a little longer and is more genuine.

“I missed you,” Beck tells her honestly.

Jade squeezes him tightly for a moment. He’s changed his cologne. Other than Tori and maybe Cat, he’s the person who knows her best in the whole world, and she silently laments that they haven’t had much time for each other since she started college and he started trying to be a working actor. But she doesn’t say any of that. Instead, she just says, “Your old cologne was better.”

“See, that’s what *I* told him!” Robbie interjects.

Beck sighs. “Yeah, yeah,” he mumbles. “I like it.”

It’s rare for Beck to express a solid opinion on anything, at least, it was back when Jade dated him. She kind of admires him for putting his foot down about this one. Even if he is 100% wrong about it.

“Eh, his body, his choice. He can smell lousy if he wants to,” Jade says dismissively.

“I wouldn’t say he smells *lousy*,” Robbie backpedals, leaning in to sniff at Beck, making him grin, before offering him a peck on the cheek.

“I would,” Jade insists, mostly to be contrary.

“So, one semester down.” Beck surveys them all fondly. “How was it?”

They’re just starting to get into some of the details of their semester, the projects they had to work on, the boring classes they were required to take and the more fun ones they actually got a lot out of, when Andre and Carly arrive.

“Andre! Andre’s here!” Robbie shouts excitedly at the sight of him. He and Beck are the first ones over to give him a big hug.

“Whoa, hey, okay,” Andre laughs, accepting the hugs from his friends. “I missed you guys, too. Hey, this is Carly.” He gestures to the woman beside him. Jade glances at Sam, wondering if they’re all about to experience a werewolf territorial circling as friend connections intersect, but although Sam seems stiff, no fur begins flying between them, metaphorical or otherwise.

“Well, we know *that*,” Robbie scoffs, offering Carly his hand and shaking it more vigorously than seems appropriate. “I’m Robbie. Maybe your friend Freddie told you about me?”

“Sorry, no.” Carly smiles apologetically.

“Oh.” Robbie seems a bit crestfallen. “Well, I mean, I guess I don’t know him *well*, but he and I went through something pretty intense together, and we made a connection—”

Beck puts a hand on Robbie’s shoulder, which quiets him, and offers a smile and wave to Carly. “Hey. I’m Beck,” he says simply.

“Nice to meet you.” Carly offers her hand, and shakes Beck’s. “This is your place?” She’s gazing up at Beck’s parents’ house.

“Yeah, but.” Beck follows her gaze. “The party’s out here.” He grins and gestures to his trailer.

“Oh.” Carly looks over at the trailer, but then her eyes stray over to where the rest of the women are all standing and she smiles. “Hey, guys,” she greets, heading over to the group of them.

“I’m glad you could make it!” Tori says excitedly, moving to hug Carly.

“Yeah, you’re in for a treat,” Jade drawls dryly.

“Don’t listen to her,” Tori admonishes, “We’ve had some great times at Beck’s over the years.”

As Tori begins to offer Carly the highlights reel of their years of partying at Beck’s, Jade glances at Sam, remembering the conversation they had a few weeks ago, when Sam had indicated that being at a party with Carly would probably be fine. She wonders if Sam still feels that way now, because to Jade, the fact that Carly and Sam haven’t acknowledged one another at all feels so awkwardly apparent that Jade feels itchy.

Maybe Cat feels the same way, because Jade can see her looking expectantly between Sam and Carly, but as Sam just continues standing with her hands in her pockets, and Carly’s attention stays focused on Tori, Cat huffs softly, then takes a few steps closer to Carly. “Hi, I’m Cat!” she greets.

Beck’s eyebrows rise, “Sorry, I didn’t know you didn’t know Cat,” he addresses Carly, “or I’d have introduced you.”

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure,” Carly tells him. Her smile is a little tight, but she waves a greeting at Cat. “Nice to meet you,” she says politely.

“Wait, why *haven’t* you met Cat?” Robbie asks in confusion. “You’re Sam’s best friend!”

Beck elbows him subtly. Jade is sure he *can’t* actually know anything, but he seems to have at least picked up that something is awkward. Carly’s smile stays fixed. “I’ve just been so busy with school, I’ve barely seen Sam. I mean, I only really befriended Tori and Andre because we have classes together.”

It’s not a lie. Not really.

Sam shuffles awkwardly. “Eh, it’s my fault, too. Guess I like keeping Cat all to myself sometimes.”

“You do not,” Cat argues back playfully. “We’ve all been busy,” she acknowledges, “but I’m happy to finally meet you now!”

“Me, too! It’s great to finally meet the person who makes my best friend so happy.”

Carly glances at Sam, whose lip quirks a little as their eyes meet. It’s subtle. Jade wonders who else even noticed it.

Apparently not Cat, because she’s already chatting with Carly, “Tori forgot to tell you about the time in high school when Beck’s neighbors complained because we were doing karaoke too loud but then when the officer arrived, Tori convinced her to do a duet, so we got off with only a warning.”

“I kind of knew her because my dad’s a cop,” Tori explains awkwardly.

“And yet, somehow, I’m allowed at her house,” Sam jokes. It’s a little stilted, but Carly flashes her a smile.

“I’m guessing Cat keeps you in line, then. Somebody has to, without me around.”

“She keeps me on a pretty short leash,” Sam glances at Cat fondly.

“It’s a long leash,” Cat argues. “I just keep a firm grip on it.”

Carly laughs. Sam moves closer, but it’s to put her arm around Cat’s waist. Carly looks over to Andre, who is hovering nearby, close to the other guys. “What about you, Andre? What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done at Beck’s?”

He and Beck exchange amused glances. “You got about four hours?” Andre asks jovially. “I’ve been friends with Beck for a long time.”

“We should continue this conversation over drinks. Or bud,” Beck suggests, gesturing toward his trailer.

Andre approaches to guide Carly into the trailer. “We’ll show you around,” he says graciously.

Jade glances back over at Sam, who is watching Carly and Andre with her brows knit slightly.

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This is a little more awkward than Carly thought it would be.

When she and Sam had last talked, they’d agreed that being together at the same party would be fine, they could be civil and keep things from being awkward around their mutual friends.

But Carly can’t help but feel like the awkwardness between them must be so apparent that everyone can tell, that everyone must be wondering what’s going on between the supposed best friends.

Maybe that’s just because she had some weed and got a little paranoid, though. Carly isn’t exactly an experienced pot smoker.

Still, overall she’s having fun. Beck’s trailer is kind of cramped, but it’s pretty cool. Every time she looks around, she sees something new that catches her attention: a ceramic chicken, a miniature jukebox, a construction site sign. And though she only went into this knowing about half of the people at this party, she’s enjoying everyone’s company. Beck and Robbie are sweet; Robbie is clearly the more outgoing of the two, though he’s also definitely a bit socially awkward as well. Beck is reserved, handsome, and obviously enamored with his boyfriend.

It’s Cat, though, that Carly is surprised to discover she likes.

It's stupid, when Carly thinks about it. She'd assumed she'd end up disliking Cat, because of the bitterness she'd felt over the summer, when Sam had sent that postcard that essentially said, *stay out of my life, I have a new girl who's better than you, thank you very much*. Carly had mulled over that short name on the postcard for a long time, wondering about this *Cat*, imagining the worst, in the all different ways she could, everything from assuming she might be another delinquent who was absolutely going to get Sam into trouble to picturing her as an extremely smart, funny, pretty and nice person—essentially, positive qualities Carly saw some of in herself to a minor degree, but exaggerated in Cat, so that Sam would have an even better replacement for her former girlfriend. As if Sam had traded her in for a superior model.

Carly was never sure which was worse.

Now that she's met Cat, it's clear she falls more into the latter category. She's nothing but gracious to Carly, despite apparently knowing her history with Sam. She's positively *adorable*, with doe eyes and a nice smile. And she's *funny*. She's so dry at first that Carly isn't quite certain that she's joking (and sometimes, given the reactions of her friends, people around her aren't sure either), but when she takes her cues from Sam, who grins and chuckles at the things Cat says, Carly begins to realize that Cat is actually kind of witty. Weird, to be sure, but funny, and most of the time it's on purpose.

At least, she's *pretty* sure it's most of the time. The girl is either naive or has a hell of a poker face.

It's easy to fall in with Tori and Cat, who are clearly good friends, and who both make an effort to make Carly feel welcome. Which, everyone is doing that, actually. Including Andre.

It's weird. Carly actually came here with Andre. She isn't actually sure whether they're on a date or not, she figured she'd just see how the evening went and decide how she feels about him, because he's definitely an attractive guy, and someone she has enjoyed getting to know at school, but she doesn't yet know whether she *likes* him, like that. And she's not sure how he feels about her. The invitation to this party had *seemed* so casual, but then, maybe he's just confident when he asks girls out. It can be hard to read guys.

But in spite of that, it's like she has to pull her focus back to Andre sometimes, to make sure they stay connected at this party. Andre seems fine, though. He's obviously among his friends, so it's not like he's outside of these conversations Tori and Cat draw her into. In fact, Tori pulls his attention to them several times, and they'll relay stories, or sing a few lines of songs they've written together, as Carly gets treated to recountings of several stories of their time as a friend group, as they all reminisce about the days they used to spend all together.

And, inevitably, as Tori tells a story about hiding in a fake soda machine to spy on her friends, Carly glances at Sam to see that Sam is already looking at her with a subdued smirk.

"Reminds me of Spencer's giant pants," Carly says to her.

"Only Tori's not a criminal," Sam agrees.

"Not according to Jade that day," Cat mumbles as an aside.



“Wait, what’s this, now?” Andre asks in curiosity.

“Giant pants! Wait, I remember those from your webshow,” Tori says excitedly. “What do you mean, criminals?”

“Well...” Carly looks to Sam again. “Spencer may have accidentally smuggled some criminals out of prison in his pants.”

“That is the worst way you could have phrased that,” Sam accuses playfully.

“In his *giant* pants!” Carly attempts to clarify, then realizes that’s not exactly helpful. “His sculpture! He sculpted a giant pair of pants!”

The desperation in her tone as she attempts to explain makes the other laugh, and then Robbie announces, “I once smuggled tacos in my pants!” and then they’re off reminiscing about a time they all got detention together. It’s entertaining, but Carly’s mind keeps wandering to Sam, and the way they can’t quite seem to avoid each other at this party, and how she isn’t quite sure what that means, if anything.

At least when she’s been with Tori and Jade, she knows their history is out in the open. Carly doesn’t have to hide. But right now, it’s like being back in the *iCarly* studio space with Freddie, Gibby, and Spencer, looking at Sam knowing they’re hiding something monumental, but feeling as though she has no choice. Because these are all Sam’s friends more than they are hers, and the secret seems like Sam’s prerogative to keep.

It occurs to her that Andre has no idea about her history with Sam, Andre simply assumes they’re best friends, and if he senses any awkwardness between them, he has no context for it. And it makes Carly feel *weird*. If she likes Andre, if she wants to date him (she still can’t decide how she feels about the prospect), it feels disingenuous to get involved if she can’t even explain her past. Even the idea of explaining she’s bisexual feels impossible, because her connection with Sam is an integral part of the formation of that identity, but she can’t explain that. And it doesn’t feel *right* to try to date Andre without being able to be her authentic self with him.

And, maybe she hit the joint a few too many times, because Beck’s trailer starts to feel less cozy and more claustrophobic, but Carly doesn’t know how to handle it. She’s hot, she feels like she can’t breathe, and the pleasant tingling in her limbs starts to feel like static, like her legs want her to run.

Cat seems to be the one who notices first. “Hey, are you okay?” she asks quietly.

“Yeah,” Carly lies, taking a deep breath to try to calm down, but Cat’s question attracts the attention of more people, and that just makes Carly feel even more panicky.

“She needs air,” Sam says promptly.

“I’ll help,” Cat immediately offers.

“Babe, maybe you’d better—” Sam starts.

Tori is already on her feet, gently touching Carly's elbow to guide her to her feet, "I've got her," she tells Sam and Cat. "Let's go outside a moment, huh?" Andre steps toward them, looking concerned. "She's fine," Tori assures him, and he wavers, frowning slightly, standing uncertainly near the doorway.

Once she's outside the trailer, Carly starts to feel better almost immediately. She takes in deep breaths of cool air. It's December in Los Angeles, which isn't quite as cold and dreary as it often is in Seattle. But it's chilly enough that Carly wishes she had on the jacket she'd left inside. But, really, the coolness on her skin is welcome, too.

Tori stands quietly nearby, but not too close, giving her space, until Carly's breathing starts evening out, and she can feel her heart rate start to slow down; she hadn't even realized it had been racing. "Everything okay?" Tori asks tentatively.

Carly nods, and it takes a few seconds for her to feel like she can verbalize things. "Yeah. I think I'm just not used to marijuana, so much," she laughs, but there's not much humor in it.

"That happens," Tori cracks a smile. "Just keep focusing on breathing."

Carly nods again, more vigorously this time. "No, I know. I get claustrophobic sometimes. That was part of it, too, I think. At least I didn't go totally incoherent. Can't imagine *what* Andre would've thought if I had." She shakes her head with a self-deprecating little laugh.

Tori shrugs. "Eh, I doubt Andre would have cared. He's friends with the rest of us, and we're all hardly normal." She frowns, thoughtful. "Actually, he'd probably have understood. I guess you've never seen Andre freak out over something yet, huh?"

Carly shakes her head. "I can't even picture that. I thought he must be the 'normal' one in your friend group."

"Honestly, that's probably Beck," Tori chuckles.

"The gay guy who lives in a trailer in his parents' driveway is the normal one?" Carly asks dubiously.

"Well, when you put it that way..." Tori trails off thoughtfully.

Carly is starting to feel better, and she hears the door to the trailer open. For a wild moment, she thinks it's going to be Sam, then expects Andre, but when she turns to look, it's Cat.

"I thought you might need this," she says, her tone gentle. She holds out a bottle of Crystal Waters.

Carly lights up, because water sounds *great* right now. She takes the bottle and drinks a good swig before she even replies. "Thanks," she tells Cat, taking another drink. "My throat is *so* dry."

Cat giggles. "Cottonmouth."

“Huh?” But then Carly gets it. “Oh.” She laughs, just a bit. “I’m still getting used to all the lingo.”

Cat nods seriously. “Welcome to California. Is this the first time you’ve smoked?” she asks curiously.

“Actually...yeah.” Carly had admitted to being inexperienced before, but hadn’t wanted to seem like a *total* square, especially not in front of Andre, who from the way he spoke, was a bit of a cannabis connoisseur. “Not because I didn’t want to,” she adds quickly. “Just never had an opportunity before.”

“Well, there’s no shame in getting a little freaked out,” Cat tells her. “*I* still get a little freaked out sometimes. That’s why I don’t take more than a hit or two.”

“You’ll learn your limits,” Tori agrees, then quickly adds, “Unless you don’t ever want to do it again, which would also be totally fine.”

Carly laughs. “I’m fine. I’m sure I’ll want to do it again.” She takes another sip of her water. It tastes *so* good. “This water is the best.”

Tori and Cat both start giggling. “She *is* feeling better,” Cat says to Tori.

“Ready to go back in?” Tori asks her.

Carly throws back another big mouthful of water and grins. “Ready.”

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Cat is still pleasantly buzzed when Jade drives them all home. It’s late, almost two in the morning, and she’s sleepy, leaning against Sam in the back of the car. Sam is definitely a little drunk; she’s being sweet and affectionate, and her hands wander lazily, nowhere too scandalous, but Cat feels little touches all over her skin. It makes her grin.

Tori is chatty with Jade in the front seat. It seems like a final wind before she likely goes back to her room and passes out. Jade, of course, is sober, and sounds like her usual grumpy, sarcastic self.

Cat must drift off at one point because she wakes up to Sam shaking her gently and she realizes they’re in Tori’s driveway. They stumble inside (though quietly). Jade, still in the role of the sober, responsible one, gets pillows and blankets for Sam and Cat to use on the couch, urges them to at least go brush their teeth in the downstairs bathroom, and then guides Tori upstairs.

She and Sam get ready for bed (though not after Sam sneaks a snack out of the Vega kitchen) and then the two of them get changed and lay together on the couch. There have been times when they’ve both been a little too intoxicated to share a couch, but tonight, they arrange themselves together, and Cat feels Sam wrap a secure arm around her stomach, holding her safely, back flush against Sam’s chest.

“Did you have a good time?” Cat asks Sam through a yawn, eyes already closed.

“Yeah, pretty good,” Sam replies, already sounding far away. “Got me thinking, though.”

“About what?” Cat asks.

Sam is quiet for a long moment. Cat thinks she’s considering her reply, but then she hears the sound of her breath, already halfway to a snore. She chuckles to herself, shifts her hips a little closer to Sam’s, and lets the sound of her breath lull her to sleep.

In the morning, Cat forgets about what Sam said, at least at first. She helps Tori make breakfast, while Sam hovers near the coffee machine, cursing how slow it is (Jade is still asleep; Tori tries to wait until coffee is brewed before waking her, whenever possible). They all recover with breakfast and coffee, watching cartoons and getting motivated to do anything else.

Before long, Sam is ready to drive them home. She slings an arm around Tori and punches Jade in the shoulder to punctuate her goodbye. “Thanks for everything. Beck already planning the next one?”

“Might be my turn next,” Tori says, “But I’ll talk to him.”

“Well, no matter what, I’m there,” Sam vows, as Cat hugs both Tori and Jade before following Sam outside to her motorcycle.

Thinking about the night before, and the prospect of their next party, makes Cat remember the newness of Carly’s presence there, and Sam saying last night that the party made her think. Unfortunately, it’s not that easy to chat on a motorcycle, so Cat has time to wonder what Sam might have been thinking about as they drive home.

Almost certainly, this has to do with Carly, right? Because Cat has certainly been thinking a lot about Carly since the party, too.

She hadn’t really known what to expect. She’d thought there was a part of her that might be jealous of Carly. She’d made peace with the fact that Sam’s first love is not her, but she can’t deny that sometimes she wishes she could have that special place in Sam’s heart, the way Sam is so special to her.

She also hadn’t quite known how Carly might react to Sam or to her. She anticipated things might be a little awkward with Sam, but with herself, all she really knew was that Carly had confessed before coming to Los Angeles that she still had feelings for Sam. Could those feelings that had already lingered through so much time and distance have faded? Maybe not, maybe so. Cat didn’t know if Carly would be cold to her, or indifferent, or even kind, in an overcompensating way.

But Cat had enjoyed Carly’s company. A lot, actually. She thought she was sweet, and funny. She even enjoyed the moments when Carly and Sam had talked, enjoyed seeing Sam reminisce about happy days, enjoyed hearing the two of them laugh, in those fleetingly rare moments during the party when they actually had a rapport.

She wonders how Sam feels about all of this, if Sam had enjoyed those brief interactions as much as Cat had enjoyed watching them happen.

They get home, and Cat takes a moment to settle, unpacking her bag, mentally planning the lunch she's sure Sam is going to want to eat soon. But as Sam sits on the couch and reaches for the remote, Cat realizes she needs to say something before Sam gets sucked into something on TV.

"Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"What did you mean last night?"

Sam's brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

"When you said that being at the party made you think."

"Oh," Sam says quietly, "That." She shifts a little on the couch. "I kinda forgot I said that. I'm still kinda thinking about it."

"Oh," Cat echoes, but she doesn't want to just leave the conversation there. She moves over to sit next to Sam on the couch. "Is it about Carly?"

Sam lets out her breath. "Yeah," she admits. She scrutinizes Cat a little. "Were we awkward?" she asks.

Cat shrugs. "Yeah, a little. But probably only because I know what's going on between you."

"Nothing's going on between us," Sam retorts quickly.

"That's exactly what I mean," Cat agrees. "But you also had some really nice moments. Times where it was clear you got each other. I think the guys probably thought the two of you were fine. Or maybe just thought any weirdness was because Carly was the third wheel."

Sam's face scrunches up thoughtfully. "Was she, though? She came with Andre."

Cat shrugs. "She did. But I couldn't tell what was going on with them."

"Well, maybe we'll all be happily partnered up, then," Sam says gamely.

"Would that make it easier to be around Carly?" Cat asks.

Sam's mouth twists. "No, probably not. But that's the thing I keep thinking about."

"What about it?"

"Just that...I thought that keeping my distance from Carly was what I wanted. What I *needed*. But I'm starting to wonder if it even makes any sense."

Cat turns a little more toward Sam on the couch. Sam is facing her, but looking down, expression pensive and uncertain. “Talk to me,” Cat urges encouragingly, “Maybe I can help.”

Sam glances up at her, then her eyes drop again. “I thought that a group setting at a party would make it easy to avoid Carly. Instead, it just made it feel *weird* that I was avoiding Carly. Especially since half the people there don’t know our history, or even *why* I’d want to not get close to her. It just felt like it put us both in a weird position, and you guys, too. You, Tori and Jade. It didn’t feel right.”

“That makes sense,” Cat replies, trying to sound neutral, but really, she thinks Sam is probably right. It *didn’t* make any sense for the two of them to attend a party and pretend to be strangers.

Sam looks almost frustrated. “You’re okay with this?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Cat answers, “You’re making sense to me.”

“But...then...” Sam starts, but then falls silent again.

Cat shakes her head. “I don’t know what the problem is. I like Carly, I think she’s great! She’s funny, she’s sweet. And she was nothing but nice to me, even though she didn’t have any reason to be!”

“She’s like that with everybody,” Sam replies guardedly, though the corners of her mouth are lifting a little.

“But that’s what I mean, I don’t think she’s going to be weird about our relationship. Even if she’s not thrilled about it, I don’t think she’ll try to hurt us.”

“I don’t know.” Sam shakes her head. “She can be pretty conniving and underhanded when she’s not happy about a relationship.” Cat frowns, and Sam glances up, taking in her expression. “But you’re right, I don’t think she’d do anything to try to break us up. She wants me to be happy.”

“Then I still don’t see the problem,” Cat says slowly.

Sam lets out a harsh sigh. “The problem isn’t her, it’s me,” she says angrily. “It doesn’t make *sense* to keep Carly at arm’s length anymore, not when we share so many of the same friends, not when we’re going to the same parties. And I get that, I do. I know I need to work on letting go of the past and just learning to be friendly with Carly again, instead of just civil. But I’m scared of what might happen if I start getting *close* to her again.”

“Because you still love her.” It’s more of a statement than a question. Cat knows the answer to this already, remembers Sam laying out this exact point last time they’d talked.

“I...don’t even know at this point,” Sam replies harshly. “Maybe it’s just, like, a reflex, or a memory, and it’s not even anything real anymore. But I don’t want it to come back. I don’t

want to get *too* close. And I don't know where the boundary is, between friendship with her, and our best friendship, and what came after that."

"Even if it did come back, you'd still choose me," Cat says quietly. This one is more of a question, even though she doesn't phrase it that way. But it's something she desperately needs Sam to confirm.

Sam reaches for her hand. "Of course I would," she says, without hesitation. "I just don't want there to even *be* a choice you have to worry about."

"I'm not worried," Cat insists, already soothed by Sam's reassurance. "I really think," Cat says slowly, assessing how she feels in the moment, "That maybe it might do you good to be friends with Carly again. If you get closer to her, and choose me, then maybe you'll realize you're happy being friends, and you won't have to be so messed up about this anymore."

"Maybe," Sam says, not sounding convinced. "I guess if nothing else maybe I can solve a problem for Tori with this."

"What do you mean?" Cat asks.

"Tori told me last month that doing separate nights in Shadow Creek Park with me and Carly was kind of a lot, and was making Jade feel like, not Tori's priority. I decided at the time that I'd sit out this month and let Tori just take Carly."

"But you love going to the park!" Cat replies.

"I know. I figured I'd just go by myself and give Tori a break. But now, maybe it would be alright if Carly and I go together. If you're okay with everything, and Carly is, too, maybe it would be fine."

But as much as Cat has been encouraging Sam to get close to Carly again, this gives her some pause. Maybe it's the fact that being werewolves at Shadow Creek Park together is something special that Cat can never experience. It's one thing for Sam to go with Tori, who she's never expressed anything beyond friendly feelings for. It's another for Sam to go to a special place with her former lover and do something intimate together that was previously a big part of their romantic relationship.

Sam must see Cat's reaction in her face, though, because she says, "Or...you don't like that idea."

"It's not that I don't like it. I just..." But as much as Cat wants to be cool, she can't. "Don't like it," she finishes reluctantly.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe that's a step too far."

"No," Cat replies quickly. Even though she's having this reaction, she doesn't *want* to. She doesn't want to stand in Sam's way if there's something she wants to do, especially if it means she won't have to sit out on the evenings in the park with Tori that mean a lot to her. "I just need to get used to the idea, I think."

“I don’t *have* to do it,” Sam insists.

“But I think you *should*,” Cat insists right back. “Because the fact that I’m not a werewolf is my *own* insecurity. Even if I never let you and Carly be werewolves together again, it would never take away the fact that you *grew up* as werewolves together. That you’ve bonded as wolves together countless times. It would just be me trying to feel better about something that can never change. And that’s stupid.”

“I don’t think it’s stupid to be uncomfortable with this,” Sam says gently. “I know that it must be hard to even understand, for you, what it’s like for us. I wouldn’t really blame you.” She leans toward Cat a little. “Like, I got insecure about you being able to talk about performance and stuff with your friends, when I didn’t feel part of that.”

“Yeah, but you got over that. Plus, you’re kind of a performer, too,” Cat argues.

“Bad example, I guess. Or maybe not because you might not be a werewolf, but you’re part of this. Most humans don’t know anything about us, but you’ve *seen* werewolves. You’ve *touched* one.”

“That’s not the same thing as *being* one,” Cat refutes, but she’s also processing what Sam is saying, what she means. “Maybe you’re right. I *want* you to be right. I want to be okay with this.”

“Then just tell me what to do.”

“I don’t *want* to tell you what to do! I want you to be able to do what *you* want without having to worry about me!” Cat can’t explain it, but she’s starting to cry. It doesn’t even make any sense, but something about this whole situation just makes her feel helpless and lost.

“Cat...” Sam starts, reaching for her.

Cat shakes her head. “No, just—I think you should go to the park with Carly.”

Sam is shaking her head slowly, “You don’t have to let me do this if you don’t want me to.”

“I *do* want you to,” Cat insists, “Because I love you, and I *like* Carly, and I want you both to be happy. And being able to do something special together, even if I can’t understand it...I want you to have that.”

Sam chews her lip. “I don’t even know if Carly wants to do this. I’d have to ask her. Maybe we’re worrying about this for nothing.”

“Then talk to her,” Cat says, “I really think she’s great, Sam.”

Cat can’t fully explain why this is so important to her, but it is. It’s partly because it’s always made her sad that Sam lost her friendship with Carly, both because she hates to imagine what things might have been like if, for instance, she and Robbie had tried to date and then realized they couldn’t be friends ever again. But also because she knows it makes Sam sad, too, to



have to cut herself off from someone who had been so immensely important to her for so much of her life.

But there's also a selfish aspect to it. Cat had really enjoyed getting to know Carly at Beck's party, and not just because she had been reassured by Carly's friendliness. Admittedly, part of it had been because she, like Tori, had watched *iCarly* when she was younger; sometimes they'd even watched it together. So it was kind of cool to get to know someone who sort of felt like she'd been a part of Cat's life, even if it hadn't been a reciprocal connection. She's so used to Sam that she barely thinks about Sam being a webshow star anymore, but Carly had been new enough to her that it felt like she'd stepped right off of Cat's PearBook screen.

It isn't exactly Carly's celebrity, or Cat being star-struck that makes Cat feel like she wants to be closer to Carly. That's something else. It had felt *good* to be around Carly, in a way that's difficult to parse out, especially through the buzzy haze of intoxication that had characterized the evening. But Cat knows they'd laughed a lot, they'd talked a lot, and she knows she wants to do that again.

Cat likes being around Carly. And if Sam and Carly can find peace, maybe that can happen more often.

And if Sam doesn't want Carly as a best friend anymore, maybe Cat can take over that role.

She and Carly can't get much closer than that.

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"So? You and Carly, huh?" Tori's voice lilts teasingly as she nudges Andre.

"Stop," Andre chides. It's two days after Beck's party, and Andre had texted her, saying he wasn't working at Yotally Togurt that day but that he needed to get out of his grandmother's house before he lost his mind, and did Tori want to meet him at Paramesium Records?

Tori doesn't have plans with Jade until later (after Jade has several hours to herself to drink coffee and write and brood or whatever else she does to start her day), so she's happy to meet up with Andre. She loves going to Paramesium; the store is huge, with rows of records, CDs, movies, displays of pop culture t-shirts and memorabilia, even racks of books and cassette tapes. There had been plenty of times she'd spent her entire allowance in this store.

And now, she and Andre are flipping through records; Tori likes to check out the new releases first, but Andre always likes to start with the used section, which has a bit of everything. Tori supposes it suits his eclectic taste.

But she's a little more interested in chatting as she sorts through the stacks of records where she's only heard of less than half of the artists. "You invited her to the party, though," Tori probes.

"I did," Andre replies evenly.

Talking about the women Andre dates isn't usually this hard. Andre can be private, but Tori is his best friend, and he's usually honest with her whether his dates go well or not. But maybe, she reflects, it's weird for him because he knows she and Carly are friends. She settles on a relatively neutral question. "So it was a date?"

Andre pauses. "I'm not sure."

Tori frowns, pushing the line of records she's been sorting through back so they're all standing in a neat row again. "What do you mean, you're not sure?"

"I mean I'm not sure it was a date," Andre repeats. He glances over to catch Tori staring at him incredulously, and he looks away to shift to the right and start looking through the next line of records while Tori simply focuses her attention on him. "Okay, so, I did ask her in a way that I kinda thought could be a date? But I didn't know if *she* knew that's what it was. And honestly, I'm *still* not sure how she feels about me."

Tori shakes her head. "She likes you!"

"She tell you that?"

"She told me she thinks you're cute," Tori informs him definitively, nodding confidently.

Andre gazes at her skeptically. "*Everybody* thinks I'm cute," he responds, unimpressed.

Tori glances over the top of her glasses at him. "Wow, okay, Mr. Confident."

Andre grins. "I'm just speaking truths."

"All right, live your truth," Tori shakes her head in amusement.

"But that's the problem, if you're right, and she thinks I'm cute...I couldn't tell. I just couldn't get a good read off the girl."

"What happened when you picked her up?" Tori wants to know.

"Not a lot. We kinda talked about how our finals went, what we're doing over the break, what classes we're taking next semester. It was just, like, regular conversation."

"Yeah that sounds regular enough," Tori agrees, knowing she'd had similar conversations with Carly recently. "What about on the drive home?"

"Oh, well. I think she was still kinda high. We talked a little bit about how she'd never smoked much before, and we laughed about some stuff. I don't know. It was nice, though."

"Did you kiss her?" Tori asks keenly.

"I didn't even ask," Andre replies.

Tori's jaw drops open. "You should *always* ask before you kiss someone for the first time!"

Andre's face scrunches up in bewilderment. "Not if you don't think they want to kiss you at all."

"*Andre!*"

"Tori!" He turns and grabs her shoulders. "I'm not saying I kissed her without asking. I'm saying I didn't even *ask* her if she wanted to kiss me!"

Realization hits Tori, and she feels immensely relieved that she'd misunderstood Andre. "Oh."

"*Yeah.*" Andre shakes his head.

"But...it was a date."

He shrugs. "I don't know if she thought so."

"It didn't even feel worth asking?" Tori pries, a little surprised.

"I *wanted* to," Andre explains. "I mean, of course I wanted to, she's gorgeous, she's sweet, she's funny. But I dunno. I kinda felt like we forgot we were supposed to be at the party together? And then when I thought about trying to kiss her, just, something in my gut told me it wasn't gonna be a good idea."

Tori wonders, with a nervous pang in her stomach, whether something in Andre sensed that Carly was *different*, that Carly was a werewolf, and his instincts told him to avoid her. Or maybe it's not that complicated. Maybe he was just nervous.

Or maybe, more likely, Andre picked up on some of the awkwardness between Carly and Sam at the party, and even if he didn't understand exactly what it meant, he understood that it meant Carly wasn't telling him *something*. Tori can understand why neither of them are keen to go into detail about their history and the tenuousness of their current connection, but she also thinks their attempts to pretend that nothing odd is happening between them aren't very successful. At least she, Jade and Cat were there to provide a buffer. Cat, especially. Tori is a little surprised at how quickly Cat and Carly seemed to find common ground.

"Weird," she tells Andre, not sure how else to sum up her thoughts.

"Tell me about it," he sighs.

"Are you going to ask her out again?"

Andre shrugs. "I'm not sure yet. Maybe I'll see if she wants to go see a movie or get some sushi sometime. But if I still feel like I can't make a move, then the ball's in her court. If she's into me, she can let me know."

"I'm sure she will," Tori reassures him. "I mean, you're a total catch!"

"A *catch*?" Andre laughs.

“Yeah!” Tori insists defensively.

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Andre waves her off. “Thanks, though. I think it means a little something more coming from you.”

“Because I’m your best friend?”

“No, because you’re so gay.” Andre frowns. “Though actually, you being my best friend means you’re pretty biased. So maybe it evens out and doesn’t mean anything at all.”

“Gee, thanks, glad my opinion of you is meaningless.” Tori pushes his shoulder playfully.

Andre nudges her right back. “I’m kidding. You know you’re always right when it comes to me and women.”

“Except for about Jade, apparently,” Tori smirks, remembering the time she tried to talk Andre out of having a crush on Jade.

“Nah, you were right about her, too. Except turns out *you’re* the one who has a thing for vicious women.”

“I...can’t argue with that.”

“You’re twisted,” Andre teases.

“You know she’s not vicious to *me*,” Tori points out.

Andre shivers. “Yeah. Actually, that makes her scarier.”

Tori grins. “Yeah,” she lilts affectionately, thinking of how tender Jade can be with her, the contrast to all the sharp edges she shows to the world.

Andre eyes her. “She’s rubbing off on you, ‘cause you’re starting to get a little scary, yourself.”

Tori grins. “What can I say? Jade brings out the best in me.”

## **Eastern? Forgetfulness**

Sam decides to take Cat at her word that Cat wants her to invite Carly to visit Shadow Creek Park together. She has no reason not to. She'd given Cat several opportunities to deny her this, they'd talked through their feelings on the matter, and Cat had made it very clear that she wants Sam and Carly to be able to have this.

So Sam figures she might as well. For Tori.

But of course, it's not just about Tori. Sure, Tori's dilemma is the whole reason Sam even thought about this. If Tori hadn't told her that twice monthly trips to Shadow Creek Park were starting to get to be too much, Sam probably would have been happy to let things continue as they were.

Now that the idea has taken hold, though...Sam can't really resist it. She'd spent the majority of full moons in her life with Carly, and getting the opportunity to experience that again, with Cat's full permission, with Tori there to ground them...Sam wants that.

Even though Sam knows what she wants, though, it doesn't mean it's going to be easy to get, especially with the way things currently are with Carly. Though Sam has talked to Cat about how it no longer fully makes sense to keep Carly at a distance, she realizes...she hasn't even talked to Carly about this yet.

Their last agreement involved them deciding they can coexist in places, among the same people. They can be polite, but they aren't friends. They're at a distance even when they're inches apart.

Sam has to figure out what can change, what Carly might agree to. So she starts with a text.

**Can I call you?**

This is going to be much easier to handle if they can talk rather than text, but at the same time, it doesn't feel so critical that they meet in person, either. Ironically, Sam thinks it'll be easier to talk about allowing themselves to get a little closer if they're physically apart.

**Sure, I guess**

It's not really an enthusiastic response, but Sam also knows she hasn't earned one. Cat had gone to meet Nona for lunch, to give Sam some time to figure all this out without having to

worry about Cat overhearing anything. Not that there would be anything *for* her to overhear, but Cat knows herself, and knows she can be nosy. The worst part for Cat, she had decided, would be to misunderstand something she overhears and have a bad reaction.

Sam figures she'd better clarify something.

**I mean, like. now.**

Sam's answer is her phone lighting up in her hand as Carly calls her. "Uh, hello?" she answers.

"I figured it was easier to just call rather than go back and forth about how yes, you could call me right now," Carly replies right away.

"Right," Sam mumbles. Already, she feels a bit unbalanced in the conversation. She'd anticipated being the one to start the call, to take the lead, but Carly changed that, so Sam fumbles. "So, what're you up to?"

There's a pause from Carly's end. "Um," she starts, "I'm at my apartment, having some lunch."

"What're you having?" Sam asks eagerly. She hadn't planned to continue the chatty line of questioning, just break the ice, but she never could resist details about food.

"I made myself some pasta," Carly replies. Sam grunts in pleasure, imagining the food, and Carly elaborates. "The sauce is mostly from a jar, but I added my own twist. Sauteed some onions and garlic to give it some more flavor."

"Got some taco shells to go with it?"

"No," Carly laughs. "I should have. Nobody makes spaghetti tacos like Spencer, though. And would you believe that Italians thought it was horrifying?"

"I bet they never even tried it," Sam huffs.

"You're right."

"Cowards."

Carly just laughs again, and then her tone shifts. "You didn't just call me to talk about food, did you?"

"No." Sam is sitting on the couch, and she stands up to start pacing as the conversation shifts. "Look, at Beck's party the other day...things were a little awkward."

"That's...one way to put it."

“I thought it would go a lot different, being at a party with you. I thought it wouldn’t be that weird if we kinda avoided each other. But, it didn’t work.”

“I agree,” Carly says quietly, but she doesn’t offer anything else.

“So I guess I’m saying,” Sam says carefully, “maybe we’ve got to face the fact that we maybe can’t avoid being friends.”

Carly laughs incredulously. “Wow, you sound so excited about it.”

Sam sighs, then growls, “Look, I told you I didn’t want to be friends with you for a reason.”

“Ouch.”

Sam ignores her comments and pushes on. “Some of those reasons still stand. But when we know each other so well, when we have so much history, when we’ve already kind of put the thing that came between us behind us, there’s no reason *not* to be friends.”

Carly is quiet, maybe considering this. Finally, she says, “*Have* we put the thing that came between us behind us?”

There’s a thrum of nerves through Sam at the question. She almost wishes she could smell Carly right now, to understand more of her mood. “I just mean...you left. And now you’re back. I have Cat. You have Andre.”

“I have Andre?” Carly interrupts, sounding surprised.

“You like him, don’t you?”

Another pause. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I’m still figuring it out. We might be better off as just friends,” Carly replies.

Somehow, the words elicit a pang in Sam’s chest. Not for Andre. For herself, and Carly. She pushes the feeling down. “Well, whatever, the point is, you’re back, and we’re over each other.”

“Sure,” Carly answers listlessly.

“So, let’s be friends. We don’t have to, like, be alone together, but I think we should let ourselves be friends when we’re together.”

“I suppose I’d like that,” Carly replies cautiously.

“Wow, now *you’re* the one who’s thrilled about it,” Sam ribs.

“Well,” she says, “it’s just that I don’t know what you want from me, or what you’re going to want next. In the span of like a month or two you’ve gone from never wanting to even hear

from me to deciding we can be around each other to deciding that we can be friends, but just when other people are there to watch us. Is this actually about me, about us, at all? Or just about saving face in front of your *real* friends? The ones you can actually be alone with?"

The question stings, and Sam feels her face grow hot with anger, but she also recognizes that she's earned this. "I'm just trying to do what makes sense."

"And I'm just letting you set the pace. Because you've never even asked what *I* want."

"Because—" Sam starts angrily, but she doesn't have a good retort for that, because Carly is right, again. As usual. *What an asshole*. So she just asks bluntly, "Fine then, what *do* you want?"

"I miss you," Carly answers immediately, her voice soft. "God, I've—" her voice breaks, and Sam's breath catches. "I've missed you for *so long*, and it's hurt *so much*. I've never stopped—I've never stopped thinking of you as my best friend. You know what I wrote to you over the summer." Sam's stomach lurches. "But that aside...I miss our closeness. I miss being *your* best friend."

"Carls..." Sam starts, but she has no idea what to say.

"I'm not asking you for anything, here," Carly insists. "But I'm *trying*. I'm trying to respect your boundaries, to listen to what you need. But it's hard. So if you want to offer friendship, I need it to be real. Because if you pull it out from under me because you decide you can't deal with it...I don't think I'll ever be okay."

Sam understands, but at the same time, she's pretty certain *nothing* will ever be the same again between herself and Carly, not since she had that realization she'd expressed to Cat, that her friendship with Carly had been built on the foundation of love for her. Not when she's still not sure she can be *alone* with Carly without falling back into the patterns that led to her heartbreak.

But she does know what to offer Carly to let her know that her offer of friendship, while pragmatic, is, in fact, genuine.

"Carls," she says quietly, "Want to go to Shadow Creek Park with Tori and I tomorrow?"

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In spite of herself, Carly laughs. "What?"

"You. Me. Tori. Park," Sam repeats slowly, sounding grouchy.

"I heard you." Carly rolls her eyes. "I just thought—I was so sure you didn't want that."

"Well, you're right, I didn't," Sam replies, her tone reverting to something a little gentler. "But if we can attend a party together, then why not? Besides, Tori will be there, too."

"I know," Carly confirms. "It's just..." she trails off, not wanting to verbalize the fact that going to the park to change together is something very *intimate*, something teeming with



history for them.

“Hey, I talked it over with Cat, and she’s okay with it,” Sam says simply, as if this will answer everything. And maybe for Sam, it does.

And actually, as Carly thinks about it, maybe it does for her, too. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Sam replies easily. “She’s been really insistent about us becoming friends again, actually. She knows this is a big deal, but...she wants us to have it.”

“Wow,” Carly comments, feeling a strange surge of gratitude for Sam’s girlfriend. She’d already found herself surprised by Cat’s friendliness and generosity, but this is far beyond. Maybe she’s starting to understand what Sam sees in her. A pain in the ass like Sam certainly needs someone patient and giving; boy, does Carly know that.

“So, we’re doing this, right? I can tell Tori?” Sam asks.

“Yeah. Yeah, actually, let’s do this!” Carly replies enthusiastically.

“Great!” Sam says, “We all meet up at Tori’s beforehand.”

“We all?”

“Oh, yeah, so, Cat and I drive to Tori’s, and Jade meets us there, too. Then Jade drives us all to the park, we hang out for a bit, then Jade and Cat go back to Jade’s while we stay at the park all night. Then Jade comes to pick us up in the morning.”

“Oh. Huh. I guess that makes sense,” Carly replies. “Tori just always parked up there when she took me.”

“It’s less conspicuous if we don’t leave a car,” Sam explains.

“Of course.”

“Okay, I’ll confirm with Tori and we’ll let you know what’s up.” Sam’s tone is eager now. Excited.

Carly knows the feeling.

And indeed, not long after they hang up, Sam sends a text to let her know when they’re meeting, and Tori sends an excited text about how much she’s looking forward to them all enjoying a night in the park together. Carly remembers Tori expressing that two nights in the park each full moon is kind of a lot, and she hopes that she and Sam don’t ruin this for Tori.

She doesn’t expect to, though. It’ll probably be weird, changing in front of Sam again for the first time in such a long time, but Carly is certain that her wolf self will be nothing but elated.

Though, maybe that’s part of the problem.

Emotions are different for wolves. They’re purer, simpler. Rawer.

As a human, Carly knows she still has feelings for Sam. She's been trying to set them aside for months now, ever since she got that postcard that revealed the existence of Cat. But her heart has never listened. Her heart has continued to pine, to mourn, to desire.

Being around Sam has only clarified these feelings. They haven't grown, at least, Carly doesn't think they have. She's been trying to keep them under control, trying to temper them with logic (Sam has Cat, Sam is happy, Sam is loyal to a fault, Sam would never hurt Cat, Sam has already hurt Carly). But there's no denying that her feelings remain, even as Carly continues to contextualize them, to rationalize them, to war with her heart.

Because her heart still holds space for Sam. A giant empty space that waits for Sam to return, that refuses to understand that Sam *won't*. Carly has tried to fill that space, with lovers in Italy, even with Andre, sort of, though she's *still* not sure if they actually went on a date or not, or whether she wants it to be one. It reminds her of the time she tried to date Freddie. Sometimes, someone is cute, and sweet, and courageous, and in theory, checks every box on your ideal list for a partner, but the chemistry isn't there. And you can't logic your way into passion.

And Carly can't logic her way out of it, either.

But as Sam had pointed out, Tori will be there, too. Even if Carly as a wolf feels overcome with affection for Sam, it's not like they'll be alone. And if Carly can't hide her excitement and Sam grows hostile in response, Tori will be there as a buffer, and Carly knows neither of them would ever hurt Tori.

Though Carly had also been certain that she'd never hurt Sam, and she'd done that so easily, without even fully processing the extent of it until it was far too late.

Maybe this is a terrible idea.

Even so, Carly can't help being eager to see how it all plays out.

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The next afternoon, Sam and Cat arrive at Tori's house before Carly, so for a minute, it almost feels like any other full moon. Tori invites them inside, her parents are characteristically distant but polite, Trina rolls her eyes, unable to understand why any of them would waste their time fulfilling an essential, primal part of their identity. It's routine. Sam could never quite say she feels at home at the Vega house, but she doesn't feel out of place, and that's certainly significant.

But Sam has also been anticipating Carly integrating into the ritual, so while it's a bit jarring when she shows up, a familiar person in a familiar place that nonetheless makes for an unfamiliar juxtaposition, it's also a bit of a relief. Sam's apprehension is quelled by her arrival. She's *here*. It's actually happening.

They're going to change together tonight, for the first time in over a year.

Tori's mother greets Carly just as formally as she generally greets Sam and Cat. "Oh, so you're all going to Shadow Creek Park tonight?" Holly asks, sounding more conversational than prying.

"Yep," Tori replies simply.

"That's nice," her mom replies. "Sam, have you and Carly met before, then?"

Sam glances at Carly, who looks momentarily baffled. It's kind of funny to meet someone who doesn't automatically know that they have a long friendship. "We know each other," Carly confirms.

"We've been friends for a long time," Sam amends, wanting to offer some context and, okay, maybe some reassurance to Carly, about this new rebuilding of their friendship thing that they're trying out.

"Oh, good, so then you probably won't have to worry about any territoriality," Holly says evenly, as if werewolf territory fights are barely worth considering. Which, maybe they aren't, in the scheme of things, considering the impetus to live discreetly would likely prevent werewolf murder (at least over something as relatively inconsequential as territory), and evidence of any other kind of violence would heal with the change back to human form.

"I've changed with both of them, and they've changed with each other," Tori informs her mom.

Holly just smiles. "Well, then, have fun, you guys. Jade, are you driving again?"

"Yep." Jade nods.

"Good. I do really prefer Tori not leave her car up there all night. Someone is bound to notice eventually." Mrs. Vega sounds more parental with this concern than she ever has to Sam before. Apparently, werewolf secrecy brings out her maternal instincts.

"I know, I know," Tori sighs, "I think we've got it figured out, though, so I might not have to do that again."

Sam glances at Carly, feeling Tori's hopefulness, and senses Carly's determination to *not* fuck this up matching Sam's own.

As Tori's mother wanders upstairs, evidently to get ready for her own night, the five of them head to the kitchen to start some frozen pizzas for a quick dinner before they head out. Sam doesn't get to eat a whole pizza, the way she might like, but she's reasonably satisfied with her meal before they climb into Jade's car and start their drive to the park.

Tori sits in the front seat next to Jade, of course, and for a brief moment, Sam freezes, wondering if she's expected to sit in the middle seat, between Carly and Cat, because she certainly knows them both best. But a part of her balks at placing herself between them, feeling like, in a way she can't quite articulate, it might communicate a desire to *not* choose Cat.

But she's saved from having to make up an excuse by Cat herself, who eagerly slides right into the middle seat. "I'm the shortest," she reasons. "So I should sit in the spot with the least amount of legroom!"

"I'm barely taller," Sam chuckles. For some reason, she's not as relieved by Cat taking the fraught spot as she thought she'd be.

"Yeah, but you don't know how to sit like a lady," Cat gazes at her with affectionate reproach.

"Sure I do, but why should I?" Sam challenges, settling into the seat behind Tori and buckling her seatbelt.

"So that the rest of us would have somewhere to put our knees without having to fight with yours," Carly cuts in dryly as she situates herself in the seat on the other side of Cat.

"There'd be plenty of room!"

"I'll let you sit in the middle on the way back if you want to so badly," Cat offers, looking a little apologetic.

"Nah," Sam waves the offer away. "No, you're right, you fit better anyway." Just being given the offer that she could then turn down makes her feel a little better.

"Thank you," Carly stage whispers to Cat. "I value my legroom."

Cat giggles. "Don't worry. I'll protect your legroom."

"I'm not *after* anyone's legroom," Sam mutters, sulking playfully.

Cat leans against her and pats her knee reassuringly, offering her a sweet smile that makes Sam gradually unfold her arms and reach to interlace her fingers with Cat's, their hands on the seat between their thighs. It's a politely discreet little show of affection.

Though it also reminds Sam of moments with Carly, back in Seattle. The way they'd attempt to get away with the tiniest gestures of affection among their friends, to keep anyone from realizing the romantic nature of their connection. Sam can remember a time, early on, back when she and Carly were just kissing around the full moon, riding in Socko's RV with Spencer and Freddie. The full moon was soon, they were planning to stay over at Carly's after they got home, and Carly expressed her excitement to kiss Sam that evening by grabbing her hand under the RV's table and squeezing it tightly.

If Sam thinks about it, she can still remember the way that simple gesture felt. The way she felt warm and shivery at the same time, the way she felt like every inch of her skin was tingling, the way a particularly potent sensation seemed to build between them, like heat lightning, powerful and evocative, all with just the contact of their hands, hidden from view of anyone else, their own secret meaning, secret language, a transference of building desire.

Sam doesn't even remember what happened when they finally kissed that night. But she certainly remembers the anticipation.

She squeezes Cat's hand in reassurance now and catches her gaze, smirking just a little. Cat's cheeks turn a little pink, and Sam feels a swell of pleasure at their own subtle language, a promise of full moon intimacy for them, not tonight, but soon.

Sex during the full moon is Sam's favorite, and she knows Cat enjoys the particular thrill of Sam's heightened sensual energy during that time.

And...now Sam is horny on her way to Shadow Creek Park.

She pushes her thoughts aside.

When Jade parks, Sam climbs eagerly out of the car, with Cat following her out her door. Sam reaches for her, drawing Cat in for a hug, and Cat kisses her, a little harder than she usually does just before a wolf night. Because this is part of the ritual, too, exchanging kisses with their human lovers before kissing becomes impossible for the night.

The only difference is, there usually isn't a fifth person on the outskirts, trying not to watch it all happen.

When Cat pulls back, she immediately turns guilty eyes to Carly, and then announces, "We should give Carly a hug goodbye, too!"

Carly laughs and accepts a hug from Cat, quipping, "It's okay, I can kiss myself goodbye." Cat giggles, looking a little pink, as she turns and gazes expectantly at Jade, who stands with her arm around Tori's waist.

"I'm not a hugger," Jade states in mild protest, making Cat frown. "But I can offer you a friendly punch on the arm?"

"I like it," Carly replies agreeably, lifting her shoulder in invitation. Jade delivers the punch, a much softer tap than the ones she gives Sam, but Sam knows that's just evidence of how well Jade knows her.

It feels a little surreal when the three of them start toward the forest together.

Tori takes the lead, as she usually does, commenting, "My little clearing is getting a bit cramped. Honestly, I like it."

Sam almost jabs that what's not to like about being in close quarters with naked women, just to make Tori blush (even though Tori has gotten a lot less prudish about nudity over the months they've spent here), but stops herself, because of the implication she might *like* to be naked in close quarters with Carly.

Which...shit, she's about to be naked with Carly again.

Nudity was so common for them for so long that it had barely crossed her mind. But in her current state, still shaking off the horniness she and Cat had generated in the car, with her memories of intimacy with Carly fresh in her mind, suddenly Carly's nudity seems *very* fraught.

She wonders if this is part of what Cat had stumbled over when they'd discussed this, if Cat had thought about Sam and Carly being naked together, because Sam had honestly forgotten to consider that detail.

Still, she can be cool. They fan out in the clearing, giving each other as much space as possible, but Tori is right, there isn't a ton of room and certainly no semblance of privacy.

Tori, at least, either isn't considering that this might be awkward for Sam and Carly, or is attempting to set the tone as she begins to undress as casually as if she were discussing the weather. Which she also is doing. "Seems like it might get a little chilly tonight in the hours before dawn," she comments as she takes off her jacket.

"Good thing we'll be wearing warm coats," Carly replies with her typical wry humor.

Tori laughs, and Sam replies, "We might still be running around that time, anyway. We'll barely feel it."

"And if we do, we can keep warm together," Tori says. It's such a normal thing at this point, curling together as wolves, that she doesn't appear to think much of it, but then Sam notices her eyes dart between her and Carly, as if wondering whether she suggested something she shouldn't have.

Sam keeps her face neutral, and doesn't look at Carly. She's turned slightly away from Carly as she undresses, not turning her back to her, but not giving Carly her attention, either. But it feels even more conspicuous to not acknowledge Carly at all, so when she finishes tossing her clothes in a pile, she turns so she's facing Carly a little more. "So what'd you two do last time?" she asks. She crosses her arms over her chest, because it's chilly even now, to be outside and undressed.

Tori is crouched next to her clothes, folding them, still in her undergarments. "Pretty much the same thing you and I usually do."

"Jade showed up, though," Carly adds. "That was new for me."

"Last month she did?" Sam is a little surprised, remembering that she'd shown up to talk to Jade while Tori and Carly were at the park. So she'd decided to go out and spend some time with Tori and Carly after that talk. Huh.

"Yep," Carly confirms. "We chased toys she threw, it was awesome," she gushes.

"Well, get ready for more of that tonight. It turns out humans can be pretty fun." Sam chances a glance at Carly and they exchange a smile as Carly haphazardly folds her own clothes.

Unlike Tori, Carly is already naked, and just folding her clothes standing up, and with less precision than Tori is using. Sam's eyes are drawn back over to her nude form. Sam *knows* she is fully capable of looking at a nude woman without leering. She's done it countless times in her life, even back when she was literally in love with Carly. There are times that nudity just *isn't* sexual.

But apparently, for Sam's brain, tonight is not one of those times, because she can't help but take in Carly's skin, pale as mozzarella, and just as delectable. Her body is slim, her limbs lean, and Sam directs her gaze away firmly. *Fuck*. She should've made love with Cat today, too, so she wouldn't be so preoccupied with sex, because now she's busy remembering things she'd rather not think about.

Vaguely, she's aware of Tori explaining to Carly how Jade has a ready explanation if anyone ever notices the dog toys in her trunk, and Sam makes sure to grin and laugh in the right places. Within moments, they're all standing naked in the clearing, in a small circle, arms wrapped around themselves, waiting for the moon to take them.

"Come on," Tori urges, glancing up at the sky. "It's too cold for this."

"Someone should invent tear-away werewolf onesies or something for nights like this," Carly complains.

"Cat has a bunch of pajelehoochos," Tori suggests.

"We *do* have humans out there," Sam points out. "We could probably get away with wearing *some* clothes that they could help us out of. I didn't rip through any clothes when I first changed unexpectedly."

"It didn't look very comfortable for you at the time, though," Carly comments lightly.

"Oh, it wasn't. Okay, I wouldn't want to walk all the way back over to the cars just to get undressed," Sam admits.

"Besides, then you might lose your underwear somewhere between there and here and *that* would be embarrassing," Tori shakes her head, squinting at her companions without her glasses.

Sam scrunches up her face. "Okay, bad idea. I never want to watch Jade help you take off your underwear, even if you're a wolf at the time."

"And, I don't think I'm comfortable with either of your girlfriends doing that for me," Carly puts in. "Some things are just *private*."

"Yeah," Tori agrees. "Some things are just better kept between wolves. Changing is one of them. Not that Jade hasn't ever seen me change," she tells Carly quickly. "She has."

"Yeah, Tori knows Jade thinks it's awesome, so she saves it for special occasions," Sam teases, making Carly laugh.

"I get it," Carly replies. "The first time I saw Sam change, it was honestly pretty terrifying. Of course, I didn't know I was also a werewolf yet."

"Hey, it's not like your first transformation was pretty either," Sam shoots back, faux defensive.

Tori is looking between them with a grin, and looks like she's about to say something, when her mouth seems to stretch wider, and her eyes start to shine a more golden shade of brown. "It's coming," is what she says instead.

"About time," Carly growls, uncrossing her arms and stretching them, anticipating the change.

Sam says nothing, just closes her eyes and lets the transformation begin, awash with the memories of so many other changes with Carly, others with Tori, and now, with both of them together.

She only opens her eyes when she begins to hunch and topple forward, hands on the ground for balance rapidly turning into paws. She glances around to see both Tori and Carly in partial stages of shifting, both of them covered in brown and silver fur, and Sam feels her neck restructure itself, her muzzle grow, and she refocuses on her own experience until the subtle sensations of becoming a wolf subside, and she's standing on the dusty ground with Tori and Carly, fully wolf-shaped themselves.

In a moment, Carly is wagging her tail, dipping her head, approaching Sam with a whimper, nose twitching with her rapid sniffs as she takes Sam in. Sam feels a surge of joy at the sight and smell of her, her old companion, her closest friend. Her wolf is overjoyed by the reunion with someone who is as close as a littermate, as beloved as family, but is also different from that. Closer, even.

Sam lets out a yelp of joy, burying her nose in Carly's neck, tail wagging madly, but only briefly, before she leaps away toward Tori, inviting her to partake in the excitement with them. Tori does so by circling them both and then bounding through the trees, inviting them to follow, and the three of them chase one another out of the trees. As if no time has passed at all, Sam and Carly are already moving as a unit, Carly darting to cut Tori off in one direction while Sam flanks her from the other side, tackling her into a playful roll, and Carly is already there to block Tori's path when she gets to her feet again, tail wagging madly, making Tori leap and dance around her.

Dimly, Sam can hear Cat's voice, asking worriedly, "Are they ganging up on Carly?" She remembers how similar Tori and Carly look on the surface in their wolfskins, how without the other senses Sam now possesses, it might be difficult to distinguish them.

But Jade apparently has spent enough time with them, or at least with Tori, because she replies, "No, I *think* that's Tori. And I'm pretty sure they're playing. Right, guys?" she finishes loudly.

Tori, hearing her voice, breaks away from the tussling with Sam and Carly to leap toward Jade, who steps back, laughingly telling Tori not to get dirty pawprints on her leather jacket, they're difficult to explain away.

Sam is still dancing with Carly, the two of them bounding around, when abruptly, she spins and faces Cat, who is standing watching, smiling a little wistfully. And in that moment, Sam realizes that her attention is shifting to Cat because she has a sense of Cat's mood, a touch of sadness that tugs at Sam's heart.



She hurries over to her lover, tail low, and Cat kneels down to get close to her, reaching to hug her, enthusiastically petting her. “You’re going to have so much fun tonight!” she gushes happily.

Sam sits back on her haunches to peer up at Cat, hoping for some clarity as she studies her. Cat is smiling, but Sam still senses that small bit of anguish. Or maybe anguish is too strong a word, but Cat is certainly having a feeling about *something*.

Cat had struggled with the concept of this, Sam knows. She hadn’t been *thrilled* about Sam getting to go do something special with her ex-girlfriend, something Cat can never match. Clearly, Sam thinks, the reality of this isn’t much easier for Cat to swallow.

But then Cat is smiling at Carly and reaching out to her, inviting her to come get petted, the way Tori and Sam both are.

“You’re not going to try to make me hug Carly again, are you?” Jade asks warily.

Cat chuckles, “No, but it would be nice if you scratched her ears.”

“Fine,” Jade rolls her eyes, as they both lavish some attention on Carly, who wags her tail enthusiastically.

Soon, it’s time to play fetch, and the antics of the three wolves as they chase their toys make the two humans laugh, but a part of Sam is wary. Wary of sandpapering Cat’s insecurity, she focuses most of her rowdy attention on Tori, at least while Jade and Cat are still here. After they say goodnight, Sam feels a little freer to chase Carly, and play with her, but something has shifted in her as well.

When anticipating this night, most of Sam was in her head, remembering her past with Carly, realizing how the familiarity of changing with her, the bond they feel as wolves, would make their night together feel as if no time had passed at all, would almost revert them both back to the full moons of Seattle that they spent in one another’s company. But now, Sam is acutely aware of all the ways being with Carly now feels different. Some of that is because of Tori’s presence; having a third wolf around changes the experience a lot, mostly in the way that it opens up all sorts of new ways to play and explore together.

But it also feels different with Carly herself. And Sam has to assume it’s because they aren’t lovers anymore.

Their sexual relationship had always been entirely separate from their time as wolves, but Sam knows that their romantic connection had bled through sometimes, in the affection they offered each other, in Sam’s instinctive protective streak, Carly’s vigilance of Sam’s wellbeing. Now, they watch over each other the same way they do with Tori. There’s nothing unique in their connection anymore.

It’s both a relief and an acutely felt absence.

It does, indeed, get pretty chilly in the early morning hours, and they do, indeed, cuddle close for warmth beneath the trees as they get a few hours of shut eye. And when Sam wakes up in

the morning, mid-transformation, face pressed against long brown hair, she's disoriented, but ultimately relieved that it's Tori's hair.

But as they start to redress, Sam just feels so *relaxed* and *elated*. The three of them romping through the park had been *so much fun*. Two other wolves means double the chance to pounce and catch someone off guard, to entice someone to chase you, for someone to catch an interesting scent and guide you to it. Werewolves, like humans and actual wolves, are social creatures, with a tendency to form pack bonds, not out of subservience to dominance, but out of affection, trust, love. Sam has never had a chance to experience that, had never even had a chance to go out into the forest with her uncles, the way her mom claimed she and her siblings had done when they were young. She feels like she's thriving in her trio, which maybe isn't exactly big enough to qualify as a pack, but is the next best thing to Sam.

She almost wishes her mom might show up *now*, so she could take her on with two other wolves and *really* show her.

They're still chatting and laughing as they make their way to Jade's car. Jade groans as they approach. "It is *way* too early for you three to talk my ear off."

"Nice to see you, too, *sweetheart*," Tori snarks, pressing a brief kiss to her lips in greeting.

Sam grins widely at Cat, but abruptly feels a powerful *pang* of guilt, at the realization that the three of them coming back, chatting excitedly, might be *exactly* the kind of thing Cat feels she can't compete with. Not that there's actually any sort of competition, just that it would be so *easy* for Cat to feel left out of something obviously significant and meaningful to Sam.

Nonetheless, Cat is all smiles when she sees Sam, and flings her arms around her in a firm squeeze. "I'm so glad you had a great time!"

"No hugs for Carly, I see," Carly jokes airily, but almost before she can finish the sentence, Cat attacks her with another fierce hug, and Tori drags Jade over to turn it into a (reluctant, on Jade's part) group hug.

And, well. It would be weirder for Sam to *not* join in, so she hugs Carly, too.

A little later, after a stop at the diner, a ride home on Sam's motorcycle and a shower, they're lying in Cat's bed together, intending to nap. But Sam wonders about the guilt she feels, that still lingers a little. She hasn't sensed any of that sadness she felt from Cat last night, but she also wonders if it's harder to sense beneath her own joy.

"Hey," she murmurs thoughtfully.

"Hmm?" Cat asks, stirring, maybe rousing herself from half-sleep.

"I know you weren't sure about Carly and I doing this, but...was it okay?"

Cat just snuggles closer. "Of course it was okay. And of course I always wish there was a way I could do it with you. But mostly, I'm happy you all had a great time together." She

giggles. “You were so cute coming out of the trees, laughing all the way to the diner about everything you smelled and chased and played with.”

“I was *not* cute,” Sam refutes.

“Fine,” Cat amends, “Carly and Tori were cute. You were *sexy*.”

Sam laughs, enough that her body shakes enough to force Cat to sit up a little. “Yeah, the leaves in my hair, dirt all over my hands look is *really* hot,” she drawls sarcastically.

“Sam.” Cat’s tone is serious, but there’s a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “To me, you’re *always* sexy.”

Sam blinks. “Even, oh, right now?” she asks, faux casual.

“Mmhmm,” Cat hums, smirk deepening.

Sam flips her onto her back, hovering over her. “How about now?” she purrs.

Cat’s eyes are bright, her tongue darts out to wet her lips. “Even hotter,” she whispers, before kissing her.

The full moon sex is both reassuring and *incredibly* wonderful, and afterwards, Sam curls up next to Cat and naps peacefully, without even a worry to furrow her brow.

-

Carly drives home after their evening in the park, grateful for the diner coffee to keep her awake during her drive across the city (which invariably involves some kind of traffic snarl). The problem is, she’s still a little amped when she gets back to her apartment, though she’s also deeply exhausted from running around all night and only sleeping for a few hours. Yeah, that’s often just how wolf nights go, but it’s always easier for Carly to just keep up momentum after a night without much sleep and continue being productive.

But today, she has nothing to be productive *on*. It’s winter break. She isn’t going home to Seattle until the next week, and even that is a brief trip, since her father won’t be able to make it home and Spencer has New Year’s plans with Socko; some town in Wisconsin is known for mustard for some reason, so Spencer had sculpted them a giant bottle of mustard to “drop” on New Year’s Eve. He and Socko are driving out with the RV full of smaller mustard sculptures to sell at the “mustard drop” that night.

Well. She’s happy Spencer has plans he’s excited about, even if that means a short trip home. But then, she considers, spending the rest of winter break in LA might be great, especially if she has more parties with her friends to look forward to. Sure, she misses Spencer, and Freddie, and even Gibby, but she’s missed Sam far more.

Carly wants to take a nap now that she’s back at home, but she just can’t get sleepy. She also can’t really focus on reading, or doing much else but watching TV. She lets an episode of *Law & Order: SVU* play, letting the legal drama help lull her into winding down, and as the next episode plays, Carly turns the volume down and curls up on the couch to try to nap.

But almost as soon as she starts drifting off, her phone starts buzzing. Insistently.

Carly groans, sitting up clumsily and groping for her phone on the coffee table. She blinks the sleep from her eyes and stares at the screen. It takes her a moment to comprehend that Freddie is calling her.

“Hello?” She manages not to sound totally dead.

“Hey!” Freddie replies. His enthusiasm makes her wince.

“Hi, Freddie,” she answers tiredly. Really, she’s not trying to be an asshole, but she was *almost asleep*.

He definitely senses something in her tone, because his voice softens. “Is this a bad time? I can call back.”

“No,” Carly scoffs, fully sitting up on the sofa. She’s awake *now*. “If it were a bad time, I wouldn’t have answered. I’m just kinda tired. I was up late last night.”

“Oh,” Freddie replies lightly. “Enjoying winter break?”

“You could say that.” Carly smiles at the memory, the feeling of moonlight invigorating her heart, the crisp night air palpable through her fur, the two wolves at her side, companions in their secret joy.

“That’s great!” Freddie enthuses. “What do you have going on this winter break, anyway? I know you said you won’t be in Seattle long.”

“Yeah,” Carly confirms. “But, um, honestly not a lot. Mostly just, you know. Hanging out.”

“Same,” Freddie answers.

The conversation is a little stilted and awkward. Carly assumes it’s because she’s tired, and she’s trying to wrap her mind around how to make the conversation more natural, because she *does* miss Freddie, and it sucks to feel like they don’t know how to talk anymore.

But then Freddie pushes gamely on with, “But that’s good to hear! Because I have an idea.”

“What?” Carly asks, interest piqued, and also, *relieved*, because maybe some of this awkwardness is because Freddie was gearing up to reveal something.

“So, I’m trying to, ah, *limit* my time in Seattle over the holidays,” he starts delicately.

“I can’t really say I blame you,” Carly replies lightly. She can just *imagine* what Marissa Benson’s reaction might be to finally having Freddie back in her home, under her control, after literal months away. She shudders as she considers all the tick baths.

“Hey, now,” Freddie protests, but it’s pretty clearly perfunctory.

“Sorry,” Carly apologizes quickly, though that’s just as halfhearted. “So you’ll barely be home, either, huh?”

“Exactly. So we’ll probably barely have time to hang out while we’re both home. And Sam seems like she’s not planning to come up to Seattle at all for Christmas.”

“Yeah, Sam is...pretty settled down here.”

“That’s not really a surprise,” Freddie says. “I saw how things were that time I went down there. She’s got a nice apartment, she and her roommate seem to have a good thing going. Plus, Cat is *cute*. Not that—” Freddie amends quickly, “—I think it matters to Sam. But, you know, *I’d*, uh...I’d stop talking,” he finishes.

Carly blinks, her tired mind trying to process the things she realizes all at once. First, Freddie doesn’t know that Sam and Cat are dating. Second, Carly is *jealous* of Cat, just a little. Third, poor Freddie must not even really be talking to Sam if he’s this out of the loop. And fourth, if Freddie apparently doesn’t even realize that Sam is gay, then Sam and Carly’s secret relationship is still just that: a secret.

She considers these revelations. Freddie clearly doesn’t know that Sam and Cat are a *thing*. His reaction is genuine, not him trying to hide something; besides, why would he try to hide something he would assume Carly already knows? In fact, it’s the same reaction that always used to annoy her, when he’d gush over some cute girl right in front of them. There’s still a pang of that irritation now, tempered with some jealousy, that of *course* Cat would catch his eye. She seems to catch everyone’s. Why would anyone still be into Carly, with Cat around?

Not that Carly *wants* Freddie to still have a crush on her. Not really. It was never fair to him. But, selfishly, it *was* always flattering to her.

But Freddie doesn’t even seem to have any inkling that Sam is even *gay*, which is...well, Carly wants to laugh, but then, Freddie had dated her. She supposes he can be forgiven for assuming that might mean something.

Despite that bit of jealousy, though, her irritation isn’t aimed at Cat. “She’s definitely cute, you’re not wrong there,” she agrees with Freddie, but she can’t resist a little dig. “But I don’t think you’re her type.”

“Oh, well, I kinda figured she’d be dating Robbie, anyway.”

“Robbie?” Carly laughs, surprised.

“They’re not dating?”

“Nope, definitely not,” Carly replies. She stops herself before she starts to explain Cat’s girlfriend and Robbie’s boyfriend. She’s almost tired enough to do it, but she keeps it to herself.

“Oh. Huh, okay.” Freddie seems to shake that off. “Anyway, my point is...you guys are down there, most of my school friends have already headed home for break, so, why don’t I come

down and visit you?”

“What? When?” Carly can’t help that her tone sounds alarmed, because she *is* a little alarmed. Freddie had talked about coming to visit before, and Carly figured it probably wouldn’t happen, because time had a way of slipping away too quickly in college.

“Well, I could come this week! Or after Christmas. Or both! Please don’t make me spend all of my break with my mom,” Freddie begs.

“Freddie, I don’t know,” Carly begins, “Where would you even stay?”

“Well, last time I stayed at the hospital, think they’d let me stay there again?” Freddie asks sarcastically.

“I’m sure Sam could put you in there if you really wanted her to,” Carly drawls.

“Well, listen, think about it. Talk to Sam. I can come down whenever, we can travel back to Seattle together, I can even come back to LA with you afterwards. But I’d really love to see you guys. And maybe we can even film something for *iCarly*!”

Carly smiles wistfully. It *would* be great to see Freddie, and the thought of reviving *iCarly*, even temporarily, is...well, it feels impossible, honestly.

But still. Maybe Freddie can still visit without them having to record anything for the show that, much as Carly loves it and feels a strong sense of gratitude for the little project that changed her life, she is also happy to leave it in the past, with all its associations with her relationship with Sam, a private testament to her first love. That doesn’t mean Freddie *can’t* visit.

“Tell you what,” she says, “You plan to come down in a few days. I’ll talk to Sam and we’ll figure something out. I know she’d probably love to see you.”

Freddie snorts. “With the way she reacted to seeing me last winter, I’m not so sure.”

“Oh, you know Sam.” Carly waves a hand, aware that she still doesn’t even really know the full story of what happened when Freddie came to Los Angeles before. “The only emotion she wears on her sleeve is rage.”

“Yeah, that tracks,” Freddie agrees. “Okay, then. Just let me know soon what the plan is and I’ll see you in a few days?”

After hanging up with Freddie, Carly calls Sam. There’s no answer. Instead of leaving a voicemail (she listens, just for a moment, to Sam’s familiar voicemail message, the one that’s remained unchanged for years), Carly hangs up and texts Sam.

**Freddie’s coming down to visit**

**We have to talk game plan**

Sam doesn't respond, even though Carly continually glances at her phone as she brews herself some coffee; she's awake *now*, so she might as well stay that way. When it's clear that Sam isn't going to get back to her right away, Carly rolls her eyes and takes her coffee with her to the couch, where she resumes her police procedural marathon.

To her surprise, despite the coffee, Carly dozes off in front of the TV. It's a fitful sleep, but she welcomes it, until a few hours later when she's awoken by the sound of her phone's persistent buzzing. Again.

This time, it's Sam. "Hi, Sam."

"What the hell do you mean Freddie is coming to visit?" Her voice is brusque.

This lack of a greeting might annoy Carly if it were from anyone else, but it's not such a surprise from Sam. "What did you need me to explain?" Carly asks, mildly exasperated at the question.

Sam huffs out a breath. "Okay, he talked to me before, like months ago, about how maybe he could come visit since we're all in California now. But that was back when we weren't speaking and I kinda figured he'd just forget about it."

"Well, he definitely hasn't," Carly replies. "Mostly I think he's just trying to get out of spending the whole break with his mom."

She can hear Sam shudder through the phone. "Okay, that's..." Carly can sense her softening. "I guess we should help the guy out."

"He wants to come up this week," Carly tells her, but she realizes Sam isn't listening, and can barely hear a voice in the background, and Sam answering, but she can't tell what anyone is saying. "Is that Cat?" she asks.

"Yeah. She says hi. Is it okay if I put you on speaker phone?"

"I guess," Carly answers.

"Hi, Carly!" is the next thing she hears, from a voice that is clearly Cat's.

"Hi, Cat," she replies, a little thrown off by the disruption. "We're trying to figure out Freddie's visit."

"I know! I'm excited to see him again."

"He's excited to see you, too," Carly replies dryly.

"What?" Sam interrupts. "Wait, what did he say about Cat?"

Carly winces, but maybe because she's tired, she doesn't even try to backpedal. "He thinks she's cute," she reports honestly.

“Aww!” Cat coos, though Carly thinks it might be a little bit pitying.

“I’ll kill him,” Sam threatens immediately.

“Sam,” Cat chides, “I don’t think you need to do that.”

“Well, I don’t want him to make a move on you!”

“Why would he hit on *your* girlfriend?” Cat asks, sounding baffled, but then, after a pause, she realizes. “He doesn’t know I’m your girlfriend.”

Carly wonders if she should bow out of the conversation, but instead she finds herself admitting, “There’s a lot Freddie doesn’t know.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. “Which is why we *really* need to talk before he gets here.”

“Well, we have a few days,” Carly informs her.

“Carly, why don’t you come over for lunch?” Cat suggests. “You don’t live that far away. And it’ll be much easier to talk about whatever Freddie doesn’t know if Sam has a full stomach.”

Well. That much is certainly true.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Sam says quickly, and Carly wonders how much of that is Sam’s own discomfort with Carly coming into her space speaking, and her unwillingness to tell Cat she doesn’t want this. If Sam still loves as hard as she used to, she’ll default to letting her partner get her way. Often, Carly now knows, without even letting her girlfriend know how much power she has over Sam, how much Sam lets her have.

But Carly isn’t Sam’s partner anymore. Yet, Carly still has the power here, Carly gets to make the decision, between what Cat suggests (which would honestly be easier and, really, Carly is so tired that she’d welcome someone else making her food) and what she suspects Sam actually wants.

And what Carly wants is to see Sam’s apartment, the one Freddie had praised, the one she shares with Cat. The first place she knows Sam has ever been happy to call home.

“I’d be happy to come over,” Carly replies graciously. “We really do have a lot to discuss.”

“We do,” Sam concedes. “All right, we’ll see you soon.”

“Um,” Carly interjects quickly before Sam can just hang up. “Where do you live, exactly?”

-

Cat is excited that Carly is coming to visit.

Sam seems...less excited, but she’s not being overly grumpy. Still, Cat checks in with her. “It’s okay that I invited Carly here, right?” she asks.



Sam lets out a sigh that seems to suggest she's conflicted. "Yeah," she replies, with heavy reluctance. "I wasn't really sure I wanted that, but if you're okay with it, then I am. Plus, maybe she ought to see the place before Freddie gets here, anyway."

"I'm definitely okay with it! I keep telling you, I like Carly!" Cat assures Sam.

"So I've heard," Sam replies wryly, but she smiles at Cat, and it's warm, and affectionate, and makes Cat feel like she's being hugged, even from across the room.

"Will you please make sure the living room is straightened up before she gets here?" Cat requests as she opens the fridge to figure out what to make for lunch.

Sam groans theatrically, shoulders slumping. "This is why I don't like having people over," she complains.

"Because I ask you to clean up instead of doing it all myself?" Cat challenges pointedly.

Sam deflates, and quickly backpedals. "No, it's fine, it's not a huge deal," she mumbles.

"I thought so," Cat replies loftily, then shifts her tone to a query. "What kind of food does Carly like?"

"Uh, most of it, I guess. She doesn't really like blueberries. But, you know, Spencer wasn't the greatest cook in the world and she was usually fine with what he made. As long as it wasn't burnt."

"Well, I'll be sure not to serve any burnt blueberries for lunch," Cat jokes.

Since they're expecting Carly shortly, Cat keeps lunch fairly simple, but that doesn't mean boring. She makes ham and cheese sandwiches packed with lettuce, tomato, onion and pickles, and she makes her own sweet and spicy mustard spread. A handful of chips on each plate completes the meal, though she knows the whole bag will likely get eaten with Sam at the table.

It doesn't take long for Cat to set the three plates at the dining nook, with three bottles of Blue Dog at each place setting. Sam has actually been quietly straightening up the living room, which is a little surprising, considering that Cat knows it wasn't that messy to begin with. But she looks over at Sam, who seems to be carefully placing the throw pillows on the sofa. Throw pillows Cat knows Sam usually just, well, throws.

Sam catches Cat watching her, and smiles a little sheepishly. "I guess I've never really had an actual *home* to show off to, you know, someone who *used* to be important to me, like, in the past. So I'm trying to get it right."

Cat grins, feeling herself melt, understanding the vulnerability in Sam's confession that she fumbled through. This apartment is *important* to Sam, because it's *home*. Life with Cat is home, more than living at her mother's place in Seattle, more than all the time she spent in Carly's apartment, where she had ultimately been a guest. "Let me help you," she offers.

But before Cat can get very far, there's a knock at the door to their apartment. Sam looks at her, but neither of them move for the door immediately. "Must be Carly, because Dice never knocks," Sam comments.

"You'd think he'd have learned by now." Cat shakes her head regretfully.

Sam chuckles and moves to open the door.

Carly stands in the doorway, looking tired, but she smiles. "Hey," she waves, her eyes shifting past Sam to meet Cat's, too, including her in the simple greeting. "I hoped I'd found the right apartment."

"You did. Come on in." Sam steps back to allow Carly to enter.

Immediately, Carly begins looking around the space, looking surprised and a little awed. "Wow, your apartment is really nice!"

"Thanks!" Cat accepts the compliment. "Sam did most of the decorating out here."

"Sam did?" Carly sounds a little surprised, then cocks her head to the side. "I might just be really tired, but...this furniture looks familiar."

"It should." Sam seems to be hiding a grin. "You've definitely seen it before."

Carly seems to perk up a little. "Okay, I've seen your furniture, even though I've never been to your apartment. Hmm. Have I seen it in Seattle?"

"Yeah," Sam answers.

Carly eyes the furniture again. "It's not from your old house."

"Nope," Sam confirms, then offers a hint. "You didn't see it *in person* in Seattle."

That seems to stump Carly, because she's quiet for a moment. "I couldn't have seen a picture of it, could I?"

"No," Sam answers.

"Maybe," Cat interjects, thinking of magazine articles about *That's a Drag* that she read in the past.

Sam squints at her, but then nods her agreement. "Okay, yeah, maybe, but that wouldn't be the main reason you recognize it." When Carly doesn't offer another guess, Sam says, "You also might've seen it in Italy, but I can't be sure."

Carly's gaze seems to fixate on the coffee table, and suddenly her face brightens, and she looks up at Sam excitedly. "You got replicas of the furniture from *That's a Drag*!?" she asks excitedly.

"Not replicas, exactly," Sam hedges.

Carly's mouth drops open. "Wait, but—no way—how?"

Sam turns to Cat with a grin. Cat is delighted to explain, "When they canceled the show, I was so sad. So Sam tricked the crew tearing down the set to send all the furniture to our apartment rather than putting it in storage, and redecorated our whole living room with their set pieces!"

Carly is still grinning, but Cat thinks it looks a bit forced. But it sounds genuine when she says, "That's so sweet!"

"That's what I said!" Cat agrees excitedly.

"Yeah, yeah," Sam waves it off.

"We weren't even dating yet," Cat enumerates, then stops talking, because she realizes it's probably rude to shove that in Carly's face. She switches gears quickly, "Lunch is ready!" She gestures with a flourish toward the dining nook.

Sam slides into the nook immediately, and settles in the middle seat, but then switches the plate there for a different one, which Cat thinks looks like it has more chips.

Carly shakes her head indulgently at Sam and sits down in front of the plate Sam switched out. "This looks great," she comments.

"Thanks!" Cat chirps, sitting down herself.

They're all quiet for a moment as they begin eating, Cat surreptitiously watching Carly for a reaction. Carly closes her eyes as she chews the first bite and smiles, but doesn't comment directly, just goes for another bite.

Sam finishes her entire sandwich first and is munching on chips (Cat gets up to hand her the bag so that she'll have more) and finally says, "So. Freddie."

Carly straightens a little, wiping her mouth with a napkin. "Yep. Freddie."

"You said he's coming down in a few days?"

"Yeah. I think until he has to head up to Seattle for Christmas. Like I said, he doesn't want to be there long."

Sam squints at her. "Aren't *you* going to Seattle for Christmas?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"Not until early next week."

Sam seems surprised. "Are you not spending much time there, either?"

“Yeah,” Carly confirms. “My dad can’t make it, and I guess Spencer is staying pretty busy with his art. He seems to be gaining a sort of niche following? Anyway, he bought my ticket, I think I leave on the 23rd, I have to remind him to send me my ticket details. Besides, I’m having fun in LA for winter break so far.”

Sam’s eyes drop back down to her bag of chips and she doesn’t say anything to that. Instead, she says, “So we just have to find a way to entertain Freddie for a few days, then.” Carly visibly hesitates. Sam glances up and catches it. “What, Carls?” The nickname sounds so natural coming from her mouth that Cat feels a momentary pang of jealousy. Maybe it’s compounded by the fact that she’s mostly outside of this conversation.

Carly replies uncertainly, “Well, he indicated he might want to come back to LA after Christmas, too.”

“Why?” Sam asks harshly.

“Because, again, he’s trying not to spend all his time in Seattle over break, and I think most of his friends from school went home. He’d be alone in...wherever his school is.”

“So *we* have to entertain him? I spent months alone on my bike. It’s not hard.”

“Not hard for you, maybe,” Carly retorts.

But there is one thing Cat doesn’t understand. “Why don’t you want Freddie to visit, Sam? I thought you were friends.”

“We *are*, it’s just...” Sam falls quiet and looks to Carly for help.

“It’s complicated,” Carly explains. “Because of...you know, like we said over the phone. Freddie doesn’t know things.”

“Like the fact that you two dated?” Cat doesn’t know why they’re talking around it. She knows about it. She even knows that Freddie isn’t supposed to know, though looking at the two of them now, Cat wonders how he didn’t guess. Every look exchanged between them feels like an entire secret language she’s not a part of. And she thought that by now she might know Sam better than anyone.

But clearly, not better than Carly.

That *should* make her jealous, but...it seems silly to try to compete with a decade-long friendship. Especially when Sam so sweetly stole a set of furniture from a television show for her, so soon after they’d met. Sam’s sweetness gets to be *hers*.

“Yeah, like that,” Sam confirms. “And he doesn’t know about you and I, either,” she informs Cat.

Cat nods. “Last time he was here, we weren’t dating yet.”

Carly leans forward. “What *did* happen last time he visited? He never really told me, probably because he assumed you told me.” She nods to Sam.

Cat exchanges a glance with Sam, whose mouth is turned up in a wry grin. “It’s kind of a long story,” she starts.

“And a weird one,” Sam agrees.

“It started when Jade came to visit me unexpectedly. I didn’t want her to meet Sam because I was afraid they’d kill each other.”

“Why?” Carly seems startled.

“Because Sam is Sam, and Jade is Jade,” Cat explains.

Sam chuckles. “Jade might *seem* soft, but that’s just when she’s around Tori. She’s actually pretty *scary*,” she elaborates with relish, eyes lighting up with joy at the prospect of Jade’s capacity for darkness.

“She hates most people,” Cat adds. “Just like Sam. Plus she carries scissors in her boot.”

“Like me with my—”

“—Butter-sock,” she and Carly finish in unison.

“Right,” Cat continues gamely as Sam and Carly flash each other subdued grins. “But they met and were instant best friends. I was jealous.”

“You thought I was trying to steal your best friend.”

“Yeah,” Cat replies, “But I was also worried you might like her more than you liked me,” she says in a small voice.

Sam frowns. “That’s stupid. I like you both in different ways.”

“I know that now. But I got jealous. So I called Freddie from Sam’s phone and told him she was in the hospital. He came right down.”

“I bet. Wow,” Carly looks a little impressed. Or maybe a little afraid.

“Probably didn’t help that I really hadn’t talked to him since I settled in LA,” Sam mumbles.

Carly’s gaze shifts away guiltily. “I know what you mean.”

Cat looks between them, wanting to say that they both really need to fix this rift with Freddie. Friendships are important. But then, they’re still fixing the rift between themselves. She can’t tell them anything they don’t already know and that isn’t already painful to them.

“So Freddie came down,” Cat expands. “And I thought he was really sweet and fun. We hung out together, Sam saw us together, and got angry.”

“Because he showed up without speaking to me and started taking my—my roommate on dates,” Sam growls.

“So then *Sam* was jealous of *Freddie*,” Cat continues, feeling a little smug. “So *she* retaliated by getting Robbie to come over and sing to her to make *me* jealous. Because I sorta liked Robbie, once.”

“Ooh,” Carly nods in recognition. “So *that’s* why Freddie assumed Cat would be dating Robbie.”

“He did?” Cat and Sam ask in unison, though Cat is mostly surprised that it had come up, Sam sounds murderous.

“I didn’t say anything,” Carly defends quickly. “But, uh, he’s going to notice that Robbie isn’t exactly straight. And I’m not sure you two can...hide.”

Cat looks at Sam, who shrugs. “Things with Cat didn’t start until after he left,” she explains. “Though...it started pretty quickly after he left. He must’ve sensed *something*.”

“He was friends with us for years without knowing,” Carly reminds her. “He probably thinks that’s just what girl friendships are like. But that’s the thing. We could keep Freddie apart from all our other friends, but that’s not fun, and you two still wouldn’t be able to pretend that you’re not dating. Not when you share a room and everything.”

“Oh, we always shared a room,” Sam says. “We should show it to you, actually.”

But none of them make a move to get up. “I *do* think that Freddie will figure it out pretty quickly,” Cat tells Sam.

Sam lets out a frustrated breath. “Yeah, I know. And I don’t want to keep our friends away, because we’ve all been looking forward to this break to hang out. So Freddie will know.”

“Okay, so, what’s the big deal about that?” Cat wonders. “It doesn’t have anything to do with him. He doesn’t have to know that we kissed right after we left him in the hospital.”

“In the—I thought he was joking about the hospital,” Carly interjects.

“Killer tuna fish bites,” Sam explains. “Even longer story.”

“Okay, let’s...put a pin in that,” Carly shakes her head, looking over at Sam, who clearly has more to say.

“If Freddie knows I’m gay,” she starts, “Then...” she pauses.

“It’ll hurt his feelings because he thought you loved him?” Cat guesses.

“Well, yeah, maybe, but more importantly, it won’t take much for him to figure out that Carly and I were a thing. Behind his back, for *years*.”

“*Epecially* if it also comes out while he’s here that I’m bi,” Carly supplies.

Oh. Okay, Cat can understand that, she guesses. “But why should he be upset just because you two weren’t ready to come out? That’s personal.”

Sam and Carly exchange a glance. “We were supposed to be his best friends,” Sam states.

“So? Robbie is one of my closest friends and he didn’t really come out until he started dating Beck. Jade is my best friend and she didn’t really come out until she was dating Tori.”

“And not only will he know that Sam dating him didn’t have anything to do with *him*,” Carly starts, “But he’ll be hurt because he’s had a crush on me for *forever*.”

Sam snorts. “He’s *in love* with you,” she mutters scornfully. “Or, well, he *was*. I guess time and distance can change things.”

Carly looks away, and Cat can see a flicker of pain cross her features. “I guess so,” she answers in a subdued voice.

Again, Cat can’t see the point. “So?” she challenges, yet again. The two women at the table with her both lift their heads to stare at her. “This still doesn’t have *anything* to do with him, and lying about it can’t change the past. You don’t have to live your whole lives trying to spare his feelings.”

“I get that, I really do,” Carly starts. “But also...what’s the point? It’s over between me and Sam, no one else really knows—”

“Except Tori. And probably Jade. And Cat,” Sam interrupts.

“Sure, but they at least know it’s a secret, so it’s not going to come out. I think Sam and I have both long felt that it’s...best left behind.”

Sam nods in agreement, and Cat suggests, “Then don’t tell him. If he figures it out, he’ll figure it out. If it hurts too much for him to know, then he won’t figure it out. But I’m not about to hide how much I love Sam when he’s here.”

“Well, that’s fair,” Carly replies, her voice tinged with regret. “Maybe she’s right,” she addresses Sam.

“I think so,” Sam agrees. “So, we’ll just keep our secret, the way we always have, and whatever happens, happens when he’s here?”

Carly nods. “I think that’s the best we can do.” She shifts in her seat, expression reverting to something more pensive. “What do we do about *iCarly*?”

-

Sam frowns at her. “What do you mean?” Even though they haven’t done anything with their webshow for a year and a half, it still holds a fond place in Sam’s heart. She doesn’t want it to go anywhere.

“Freddie wants to work on it while he’s visiting,” Carly explains.

“Oh, right. He mentioned that last time I talked to him.” Sam remembers the conversation she’d had with him a few months ago, when the prospect of any of this—Freddie visiting, she

and Carly talking, the webshow returning—all seemed utterly impossible. But now, two of the three are already happening.

“I don’t know how we’re supposed to do it,” Carly sighs.

“Me neither,” Sam agrees.

“Sorry, but,” Cat seems confused. “Why can’t you do it?”

Sam glances at Carly, who looks just as defeated as she feels. She appreciates Cat being here for this conversation, because even though she asks a lot of questions that clearly feel self-evident to her and Carly, she also helps them see things in a new way. She and Carly are *so used* to living with a secret that Freddie can *never* know, that it made the whole prospect of him discovering it feel heavier than it actually is, especially considering the actual content of the secret no longer applies. She and Carly were in love once. They aren’t anymore. It took Cat to help Sam see that it doesn’t really matter that much if Freddie knows. Though, she’d still prefer it if he never actually found out, just because it would make things easier.

But as Sam starts to try to explain this snag, she finds it difficult to know where to start. “Uh,” she utters, then looks helplessly at Carly. “It’s because...it’s complicated,” she finishes, feeling frustrated that it’s all she can think of to say.

“It’s because,” Carly tries, “*iCarly* was about friendship.

“Right,” Cat says slowly, nodding in agreement. “You three were all best friends.”

“Yeah,” Sam confirms, “And the problem is we’re really...not...anymore.”

“Then, maybe working on the show would be a good way to mend your friendships!” Cat suggests cheerfully.

Sam smiles sadly, looking to Carly once again. Cat’s optimism is so endearing, but Sam knows it isn’t that simple. “It’s just that, with everything that’s happened, it’s just going to make it really hard,” Sam tries.

“Because Sam and my dynamic characterized the show,” Carly elaborates. “And we don’t have that anymore.”

“We’re still trying to figure out what our friendship looks like without...romance,” Sam continues. “We’re not Carly-and-Sam anymore. We’re friends enough that we can, like, sit here and have lunch and try to figure out what to do about something that affects us both, but we’re not *iCarly* anymore. We don’t know how to have fun together.”

Cat frowns. “Looked to me like you were having plenty of fun at the park last night.”

“That’s different,” Sam argues.

“How?” Cat challenges.

“We were wolves. Everything’s easier when you’re a wolf.”



Cat folds her arms, looking stubborn. "I think that means that, in the right situations, you two still know how to be best friends." She gestures between them. "At Beck's party you two had a few moments. The ones that made you realize you *are* still friends, even though you still have stuff to work through."

Carly cuts in, politely but firmly. "I appreciate your perspective, Cat, but why does it matter to you whether or not we even do *iCarly*? Especially since I don't really think we *want* to." She glances at Sam to confirm, who finds herself hesitating.

But before Sam can gather her thoughts to respond to Carly's assumption, Cat is answering Carly. "A few reasons. The selfish one is that I always liked your show. Another one is that I know Sam misses you and I think it would be great for you both to be real friends again."

"Cat," Sam mumbles darkly, not wanting *that* to be a topic of discussion.

"But I guess it doesn't matter if neither of you want to," Cat finishes, sounding disappointed. "You'll just have to let Freddie know nicely."

"I guess so," Carly replies glumly. "We can just say, I don't know, we've moved past it?"

Sam winces. "He'll love hearing that about something he's excited about."

Carly sits up a little straighter. "Okay, I guess let's approach it this way. Freddie comes down in a few days, we hang out, maybe introduce him to our other friends, and we see what it's like to live honestly around him. We don't try to squeeze in any *iCarly* before Christmas. He and I go back to Seattle after a few days, and then Freddie can decide if he wants to come back and hang out more. If he does, then we can figure out if we can keep him so busy that he forgets about *iCarly*."

"That could work," Sam agrees.

She's still thinking over the tentative plan when Carly asks, "You have room for him here, right?"

Sam balks. "What? No! I thought he was going to stay with you!"

Carly's eyes widen. "With *me*? No way!"

"Well, why would you think he'd want to stay with *me*?"

"Because I don't have room for Freddie! I barely have room for *myself*! You at least have a couch!"

"He can't stay here!" Sam folds her arms.

"Why not?" Carly challenges.

"Because—because Cat and I need our *privacy*!" Sam feels herself blushing as she says it. But she knows there's no way she's having sex in this apartment knowing Freddie is in the living room. "It's bad enough we have Dice and Goomer wandering in at all hours."

"I need privacy!" Carly shoots back. "You haven't seen my apartment, Sam. It's one room. Literally just," she gestures around them, "This room."

Sam scowls, but she sees that Carly has a point. Still, she's not about to give in so easily. "Yeah, but. You've always been closer with him than I am. He likes you better."

Carly laughs harshly. "According to you, he's still *in love* with me. Do you really think it's fair to make him sleep on the couch a few feet away from the girl he's still *in love* with?" she asks pointedly.

"He might still be in love with Sam," Cat interjects. They both turn to look at her. Sam feels herself deflate a little from the argument with Carly at the interruption. Cat offers a serene but slightly awkward smile. "He *was* really quick to rush down here when I called him."

"That was months ago," Sam mumbles. "Almost a year ago."

"Cat has a point," Carly says, a subdued note of triumph in her voice. "He could still have feelings for either of us. So then it's only fair to let him stay somewhere where he'll have more space and privacy. Here."

Sam feels defeated, but she stubbornly hangs on. "But if he gets in my way, I'll be a lot worse to him than you will."

"Sam," Cat frowns warningly.

"Fine," Carly says tightly. "Then what do you suggest?"

"Let's split the time he spends in each place. Call it even," Sam suggests. She knows if she pushes much harder, Cat is going to insist she just give Freddie a place to stay because it's the right thing to do.

Carly looks reluctant, but she nods. "Fine. I can work with that."

"Good."

"Yeah, good."

They're both quiet for a moment, and though the argument had been serious, Sam doesn't feel angry or resentful. It actually felt kind of *good* to argue with Carly, in a way that Sam isn't sure she likes. She wishes she weren't so tired, because it's hard to decide how she feels about the whole thing. Arguing with Carly had been familiar, cathartic...it had been real. She can't think of a better way to describe it.

Cat breaks the silence a moment later by asking, "Who wants dessert? I made cookies yesterday."

Sam perks up. "And you didn't *tell* me?"

"I wanted a chance to eat some before you got to them," Cat answers lightly.

“Oh, man,” Carly sighs. “Can you maybe brew some coffee? I’m afraid if I have sugar, I’ll just crash and be too tired to drive home.”

“I’ll brew coffee,” Cat agrees. “But maybe you should just plan to stay over tonight.” She suggests this like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Sam looks at her, bewildered.

Carly laughs awkwardly. “No, I should really get home. I forgot my purse, so I don’t even have any wolfsbane on me. I forgot to put some in my car since I only bought more so recently.” Her mouth tightens in frustration. “I can’t believe I did that. I *never* go anywhere without it.”

“Sam can lend you some,” Cat replies cheerfully. “Or you can just not take any! Sam wasn’t planning to tonight. And you two can have fun in the apartment! Sam says it’s actually pretty fun to be a wolf indoors.”

“Oh, I know,” Carly smiles patiently. She looks uncertain. “I don’t know...”

“You can stay,” Sam suggests mildly. Now that Cat has put it out there, she realizes she wants Carly to stay, she wants another night for their wolves to get reacquainted. “After all, you’ve *insisted* that we have plenty of room here,” she finishes sarcastically.

Carly squints at her for a moment, as if assessing her truthfulness, and finally smiles. “Well, all right. Better than being a wolf alone in my own apartment. Or a human, for that matter,” she finishes as an afterthought. But then her gaze shifts back to Sam with a smirk. “If you’re sure you and Cat won’t need your *privacy*,” she snarks.

“Not if I’m a wolf we won’t. So you’d better leave tomorrow,” Sam returns.

“Yay! I’m glad you’re staying,” Cat cheers. “This’ll be fun!”

Sam’s eyes meet Carly’s, and they exchange a brief smile. Sam won’t admit it aloud, but she’s kind of glad that Cat is meddling in her friendship with Carly. Well, maybe meddling is too strong a word, but Sam knows she’s being gently pushed into getting closer with Carly, and it’s a little scary, but...it’s also what she wants. And Cat clearly knows that. And that Sam isn’t very good at putting herself into emotionally risky territory on her own. Physical danger is one thing; Sam has rarely backed down from a fight or a challenge. But when it comes to her heart, Sam has always been more guarded. Cat clearly knows this, too.

They enjoy cookies and coffee, and then lounge around the living room for a while watching TV. It’s a very lazy afternoon, with each of them dozing off at different points in time, and no one puts much effort into actually paying attention to what’s on the TV, at least until *Celebrities Underwater* comes on and Sam and Carly both grumble about it until Cat changes the channel, muttering “Sheesh,” under her breath.

In the late afternoon, Cat makes a quick pasta dinner for them (with some of her meatballs, which she can sometimes keep on hand by freezing them; Sam rarely has the patience to thaw them out so she can eat them). She seems delighted that Carly enjoys her food, and Carly remarks that the meatballs taste “authentically Italian,” which nearly makes Cat squeal with joy. It’s adorable.

And by the time dinner ends, it's time for Sam and Carly to get ready to change. Sam leads Carly back to the bedroom, forgetting for a moment that it's new to Carly, until she glances over and sees Carly looking around with some wonder.

"Um. Wow," Carly chuckles. "This is...a lot."

"Oh, yeah." Sam gestures. "We had to figure out how to share the room. I slept on the couch out front for a while until we came to this compromise. This was before we were together," she explains.

"Well it's very...both of you," Carly assesses. "I can see why your mom never let you do whatever you wanted with your room growing up."

"Shut up." Sam rolls her eyes, though she knows Carly is just teasing. For the most part, her mom hadn't ever cared what Sam's bedroom looked like, but any time Sam did something that she really liked with it, her mom had forbidden it. After a while, it wasn't even worth trying, so Sam's room at her mom's house wasn't somewhere she ever liked to be all that much. This half of the bedroom she shares with Cat, though, is someplace Sam loves to be.

Cat follows them into the bedroom, pointing to the chair next to her bed. "You can put your clothes there, Carly. Okay! You two have fun! Come out front when you're done!" she says in a chipper voice, then flings herself at Sam for a quick hug and a kiss, then disappears out front.

Sam glances at Carly, but her gaze is politely averted from the bit of affection Sam and Cat share. Her gaze stays averted as Cat leaves the door ajar and they hear her light footsteps pad down the short hallway toward the front of the apartment.

Sam faces her wall of the bedroom as she starts to take off her shirt, aware of Carly's presence, but unsure what to say. It's the moments when they're alone that are the most awkward still.

Finally, Carly breaks the silence with, "It was nice of Cat to ask me to stay."

"Yeah," Sam agrees. It takes a moment for her to add, "She thinks you're really cool."

"She's sweet," Carly replies warmly.

"Yeah, she is," Sam agrees, affection in her voice. It's easy if they talk about Cat, but there isn't a lot more to say about her without things getting...weird.

Sam undresses, tossing her clothes onto her laundry chair, and then leans casually against her bed, back to Carly, who stands over near Cat's bed. She can hear the light shuffling of clothes as Carly presumably folds them, since she'll have to wear them home tomorrow. Sam wonders if she should offer to let Carly borrow some clothes, or at least a shirt or something. They used to borrow clothes all the time. Well, not routinely, necessarily, because their styles were not the same in junior high and high school. But if a situation called for it, they shared clothes without a second thought, the same way Carly's home (and refrigerator) was always

open to Sam, and Sam's aggression was Carly's to employ, since Sam could only offer her acts of service, without really any possessions worth sharing.

She remembers the way it had felt sometimes, when Carly would encourage her to reign in her anger, and she had obeyed without a thought, even though it was antithetical to her nature. The way Carly had, a few times, sicced Sam on someone who she felt really deserved it. It had made Sam feel like her knight, though she hardly felt chivalrous most of the time, and Carly was her queen. She would have allowed Carly to lead her anywhere.

Carly breaks the silence by asking, "So...when did you tell Cat?"

Sam blinks, and turns a little bit so that she can see Carly peripherally. "Uh, it had been a few months of us living together. Not long after Freddie visited, actually. Before we started dating."

"I've always wondered about telling a human," Carly muses. "I thought I *was* the human, when you started changing, but I've never...told a human. How did you know you could trust her?"

"She didn't give me much of a choice," Sam says wryly, glancing over to meet Carly's eye for a moment. "She cornered me as I was trying to leave to ride out to the hiking trails in the mountains to go change and forced me to stay home. She could tell I was hiding something and it was making everything weird, and I felt like there wasn't a lie I could tell that would explain everything she'd been noticing and not ruin what we were building, because we'd kissed already, but I told her I couldn't be with her. Because she didn't know." She glances at Carly again, more awkwardly this time, wondering if this detail was too much to share, but she wants to explain why she'd felt like she had to tell. The secrecy is so ingrained in both of them, she wants Carly to understand why the stakes felt so high, why the prospect of losing what she was building with Cat felt worth the risk of telling her something dangerous and extremely private.

She can see Carly nodding in understanding. "I guess when you live in such close quarters with someone, secrets are hard to keep."

"Yeah," Sam agrees. She thinks about all the time she used to spend with Carly, when they were much younger, when Sam had been falling in love with her, but didn't really know how to understand it yet. She wonders if a part of Carly knew, if the secret Sam felt like she carried close to her chest was even really a true secret, with how deeply they knew one another.

"I guess I never really got that close to anyone else. Other than you," Carly says wistfully.

Sam doesn't know what to say to that and looks away, so she can't see Carly anymore.

"Because you're right. It's really hard to...be with someone who doesn't know you, the *real* you, the full you. God knows I tried," she laughs softly. Sam feels her stomach churn unpleasantly at the thought of Carly *trying* with someone else. "Tori never told Andre what she is, did she?" Carly asks, half in jest.

Sam shakes her head. “Nah. The only humans who know are Jade and Cat.”

“Too bad,” Carly laments.

Sam thinks about Carly and Andre, and wonders what could happen if they grew close. Would Andre become the sixth in their little group, the partner of a werewolf, who would play in the park and snuggle with his fluffy girlfriend? Sam can’t really see it. Andre seems chill, until something really rattles him. And Sam is pretty sure a werewolf girlfriend would rattle him.

“How did you do it?” Carly asks.

Sam turns her head so she can see her again. “How did I do what?” she asks, wondering if she missed something in the conversation.

“How did you get close enough to Cat to *want* to tell her?”

The tone in Carly’s voice brings Sam to mind of picking a scab. Forgetting the awkwardness, she turns more fully toward her. “Carls,” she mutters.

“No, I really want to know,” Carly insists. Her tone is steadier, her eyes are curious. Her arms are crossed, but, then again, she *is* naked.

Sam takes a deep breath, eyes dropping from Carly’s face. “I don’t know. It happened over time. We met, she was kind to me. There was just something about her that made me want to stay. Then made me want to make her smile.” She shakes her head. “It wasn’t one moment. I think people lie when they say it is, because it never has been for me. It’s...it’s a path. And I ended up on a path that brought me closer and closer to Cat, until she was the most important person in my life.”

Carly nods, and this time it’s her who avoids Sam’s eyes. “I hope I get there someday.”

“You will,” Sam assures her. “First step is finding someone who’s actually *worth* it.” She realizes quickly how it sounds. “I’m not saying Andre isn’t. I just—”

“It’s okay.” Carly offers a reassuring smile. “He’s great, I just don’t know what I want.”

“Oh.”

Before either of them can say anything else, Sam sees the way Carly’s eyes gleam, and she bares her teeth. “Oh, thank goodness. I need this.”

“Me, too,” Sam replies, her voice already a growl. She watches Carly, whose transformation is almost as familiar as her own, until her legs shift enough to take her to the ground, and she can’t see her anymore through the things she keeps under her bed.

Moments later, though, after her transformation is complete, Sam moves quickly to peer around the footstool at the end of her bed to look across the room toward Carly, who is shaking herself off and scratching her ear with her back paw. She snuffles around the floor,

Cat's bed, huffs, and then lifts her head to sniff the air, ears perking at the sight of Sam watching her.

She yips, softly, eagerly. Sam's tail starts wagging and she rears up on her back legs playfully. Carly lunges for her.

Sam wants to start a chase down the hall, but she stumbles when her feet hit the pink carpet on Cat's side, thinking for a moment that she's stepping on something she shouldn't, and as she rolls to catch her footing, her haunches knock into the ajar bedroom door, slamming it closed.

Sam stands stock still, limbs stiff, ears pointed, as she and Carly both stare at the door. Sam thinks about all the times in the past they've been forced to remember that human homes aren't built for them, that they don't belong inside, that the balance of safety and secrecy versus freedom and self-expression is a delicate one.

Carly whines, and Sam scratches at the door, barking gruffly. But maybe the sound of the door slamming itself had been enough to catch Cat's attention, because it opens in a moment, and Cat looks down at them, amused and disapproving. "Did you trap yourselves in here?" she asks.

Sam growls, but it's playful, and Cat giggles, pushing the door open further. "Come on out!" she encourages.

Sam bolts past her, already excited for chasing, for play, and Cat shrieks lightly, presumably leaping aside to allow Carly to follow, because Sam can sense her, right at her heels. "Be careful!" she hears as they rocket around the living room, but it's difficult to *want* to, because she and Carly are together, once again, and all of the awkwardness that stymied their human interactions has faded away, leaving only joy and connection as they romp through the front of the house.

But it's too much, because Sam knows she's knocked down the decorative metal shark tooth display next to the couch, and she's certain it's not the only thing. She can't even say for sure if she broke anything, when Cat hollers, "Stop!"

She and Carly both spin to face her, and Sam's tail is between her legs, her ears low. Cat comes over and pats them both on the head reassuringly. "I know you're both excited," she says soothingly. "But unless you want to spend all morning cleaning tomorrow when I make you straighten up the room you're currently wrecking...you need to be more careful." She gestures to the hallway that leads to the bedroom. "Run there! There's less to knock over."

Almost before Cat can finish her suggestion, she and Carly bolt down the hallway. And it turns out Cat is right. With all the rolling and wrestling that happens as they let out their energy and express their joy at having time together again, all they can really bump into are the walls. And maybe the glass sliding doors, but never hard enough to damage them.

She and Carly play so hard, though, that they run out of energy quickly, and are soon returning to Cat, who kneels down to pet them and hug them both, even Carly, whose tail thumps mildly at the contact. Cat offers them bowls of water, and they shoulder each other

out of the way, each trying to drink from the same bowl, before Sam relents and drinks from the second one. Cat shakes her head as she watches them.

“You two are so messy,” she comments. “I thought Sam alone was bad.”

But once they’ve finished playing, they’re ready to relax, and they hop up onto the couch, jostling for the best position. “Where am I supposed to sit?” Cat complains. “If you want me to work the remote, you need to make room for me.” They do, and she settles between them. Sam immediately rests her head in Cat’s lap, while Carly angles her body the other way, leaning on the arm of the sofa.

But as the evening goes on, and they watch TV while Cat feeds them strips of beef jerky, Carly eventually turns herself, her head resting next to Sam’s on Cat’s other thigh.

When it’s time for bed, Cat makes sure Carly has a blanket so she can cover herself up when she turns back into a human, and a pillow so she can fall back to sleep on the sofa. She also brings her clothes up front so she can change back into them.

“Do you want pajamas? I can loan you some pajamas,” Cat offers, then frowns. “You might be a little tall for them, though.”

Carly shakes her wolf head and gestures with her nose toward her own clothes, which Cat interprets easily enough. She nods, and gives Carly a hug, wishing her, “Good night! Sweet dreams,” before she and Sam retire to their bedroom, and eventually curl up on Cat’s bed together.

It takes Sam some time to fall asleep. It’s such an odd thing, but it feels like something is missing. It’s difficult to know that Carly is so close by, yet isn’t right there with Sam. It’s difficult to sleep *not* being curled up with the other wolf. It feels wrong to banish Carly to the couch in the living room.

Yet it also wouldn’t make sense to invite a wolf who would turn into another naked woman into Cat’s bed, if she’d even *fit* in Cat’s bed.

The disruption of her ritual, at home as a wolf with only Cat, makes Sam feel strange.



## Foaming, Winter

Freddie arrives two days later.

Carly goes to Sam and Cat's apartment in the afternoon to wait for him together. He's driving down from the Bay Area, and they'd told him to show up at Sam and Cat's apartment, since it's somewhere he's been before, and because Sam lost their game of rock, paper, scissors, so he's staying at her apartment first.

Carly thinks it was probably a good idea for her to spend some time in the apartment before Freddie gets here, because after spending a wolf night here, it's starting to feel pretty comfortable. Even now, as they just kind of hang out and watch TV while they wait for Freddie, Carly doesn't feel like she's totally out of place. Without even a word, Cat takes the bag of chips from Sam to offer some to Carly before Sam can eat them all, as if Carly has been watching TV with them for a lot longer than just one night. Carly knows where to go in the kitchen for a glass of water, knows there's more toilet paper under the sink in the bathroom (because she'd had to find some, which probably meant Sam hadn't replaced an empty roll), and even knows where she can park her car.

It's good for appearances, sure, but also, Carly likes that she's starting to feel more welcome in Sam's space.

Having another wolf night together, this time with Cat, had made Carly feel even closer to Sam. In such a short period of time, they'd gone from not speaking to hanging out at each other's apartments. Or at least, to Carly hanging out at Sam's. Granted, they haven't really spent any time alone together, and there have been practical reasons for most of the time they've spent together, but Carly will take it. Reconnecting with Sam has been what she's wanted for so long.

And the wolf night...as much as they'd all framed it as something that made sense, for Carly to stay and not take any wolfsbane in the apartment, Carly knows it really wasn't necessary. But she'd loved the chance to be a wolf with Sam again, to be those primal, simple creatures together that don't care about the intricacies of human emotion. All Carly as a wolf cares about is how much she loves being around Sam, and she knows Sam feels the same way.

And even being around Cat had been...kind of great? In a way, it was like the old days, when she and Sam would be wolves around Spencer. Except that Carly had been an adolescent, and Spencer had essentially been her surrogate parent (though in retrospect, Carly feels like the caretaking had been reciprocal in their relationship rather than one way). But Spencer had given her space, allowed her to explore her individuality. Cat hadn't been quite the opposite, but she'd been much more involved with them—petting and hugging them, playing with them, making sure they had plenty of food and water, cuddling with them both on the sofa. Maybe because being with a wolf is more exciting for a human. Carly has to assume there must've been something bittersweet for Spencer, to be around werewolves and to not allow himself to change into one.

The worst part had been sleeping alone on the couch. It almost made Carly wish she were home, so at least if she were going to sleep alone, it could be on bedding that smelled familiar. But she understood, at least.

With all the nostalgia of her recent nights as a wolf with Sam, Carly wonders what other kinds of nostalgia are going to crop up with Freddie coming to town.

She's ruminating on that when the doorbell rings.

"Ding dong!" Cat sings, already moving toward it.

Sam glances at Carly and then quickly leaps to catch up with Cat (though a part of Carly assumes it's much less about being excited to see Freddie and much more about not wanting Cat to be the first person Freddie is greeted by, in case he thinks that means something), and Carly follows right behind her, because, fuck it, she *is* excited to see Freddie, as much as his visit is making things a little awkward.

Though after spending the other night here, Carly wonders if most of the awkwardness hasn't...passed.

Sam manages to make it to the door just before Cat, and grabs the handle, pausing to look at both Cat and Carly, as if verifying they're all ready, and then she opens the door.

"Hey!" Freddie shouts, drawing out the word. He drops his bags and reaches for Sam first, since she's the closest to him, and she holds her hands out in front of herself defensively, but Freddie wraps her in a bear hug anyway.

"Hey!" Sam calls out, her inflection completely different as she tries to struggle out of his grasp. He lets go, and she straightens her shirt. "Do that again and I'll punch you in the kidney."

"You haven't changed a bit," Freddie says fondly. His gaze falls on Cat for a moment, but then moves past her to Carly. "Carly!" he calls.

Carly smiles. It's big and genuine and she can't help it, it's *good* to see him, it's been a *long* time. "Freddie," she intones, the sound of his name almost like a sigh of relief as they embrace. She laughs, a little. Why was she so afraid this was going to be weird? It's *Freddie*! She pulls back a moment later, hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly. "Wow, did you get more buff?"

He flexes subtly; she can feel it under her hands. "Probably less buff, actually," he admits. "I still work out, but I have less time for it since I started college." He turns his attention to Cat. "It's good to see you again, Cat," he says, almost formally. He opens his arms, head tilting, offering the hug.

"You don't have to hug him," Sam mutters grouchily.

But Cat flings herself at him with the same enthusiasm she seems to put into all her hugs.

"It's nice to see you, too!" she chirps. She keeps the hug short, maybe because she can feel

Sam scowling at Freddie. “You must be hungry, you had a long drive.”

“Yeah, about time you got here,” Sam grouches. “Thought you said it was a six hour drive.”

“It *is*, without traffic. There was traffic,” Freddie sighs. He smiles at Cat. “I am hungry, thank you. I’ve only had gas station snacks and El Taco Guapo since breakfast.”

“I’ll make a chicken!” Cat announces. Carly can almost *feel* Sam perk up before she looks over at her, to see her bright, eager eyes and the curve of her smile.

“Chicken sounds *great*,” Freddie affirms. He picks his bag up from the doorstep. “Where do I put my stuff?”

“Here.” Sam gestures toward the living room. “You’re staying on my couch the first few days.”

“Oh, okay, great,” Freddie says agreeably, eyeing said piece of furniture.

“Yeah, we’re still about the same height, aren’t we?” Carly asks, squaring herself off and looking levelly at Freddie. “It’s probably a good thing you’re short, I can’t even really stretch out on it.”

Freddie casts her a wounded look. “My mom says I might hit another growth spurt,” he mumbles defensively. Sam snorts derisively from where she’s hovering near Cat in the kitchen, and Cat elbows her subtly, though Carly catches it. Freddie frowns darkly, but then seems to shake it off. “I’m sure I’ll be fine, though.” He’s still holding his bags.

“Here.” Carly takes his bags from him and puts them on the chair across from the one she usually sits on in the living room. Or, the one she’s sat on the two times she’s been here. Though, as she puts the bags on the other chair, she wonders where Freddie is going to sit. Should Carly move to the couch?

But she doesn’t have to worry about it for now, because Freddie walks over to the kitchen island to sit. Carly joins him, and they all chat while Cat makes dinner (with minimal assistance from Sam).

Over dinner (which is *terrific*), Freddie asks, “So what’s the plan for while I’m here?”

Sam shrugs, and speaks half through a mouthful of chicken. “Well, you’ll stay with Cat and me for the first couple nights, then you’ll stay with Carly.”

“Okay...” Freddie says slowly. “Why do I have to move? Not that I’m not grateful,” he adds quickly.

“Because Cat and I have things to *do*,” Sam grunts.

Carly gets the insinuation, but it’s not explicit, and if Freddie catches on, he doesn’t reveal it at all. “Okay, I don’t want to overstay my welcome. But I meant more than just where I’ll be sleeping.”

“Our friend Tori is having a Christmas party tomorrow night,” Carly suggests. “We thought you might want to meet our friends.”

“That sounds good,” Freddie replies amiably. “Tori, huh?” he muses. “I remember we met a Tori down here before.” He grins, a dreamy look in his eyes. “She was hot, too.”

Carly smirks at Sam and Cat. “Oh, it’s the same Tori,” she lilts playfully.

Freddie’s eyes get huge. “It *is*? You never told me that!”

“Never had a chance,” Carly explains.

“Wait. So you’re friends with Tori? Hot Tori?” Freddie seems stunned.

“We both are,” Sam explains. “I met her before Carly even got here. Because she’s a friend of Cat’s from high school.”

“Yeah,” Cat confirms. She giggles. “You think she’s hot?”

“Uh, *yeah*,” Freddie answers. “Sorry. Maybe that’s crude. Carly and Sam are used to me, but you—we’re—” he gestures between himself and Cat, clearly trying to save face a little.

“It’s fine,” Cat smiles. “You’re not wrong. Tori’s very pretty.”

Sam looks at her askance, but Freddie doesn’t seem to notice. “So, is she...single?”

All three of them start laughing. Freddie looks slightly crestfallen.

“She’s definitely not single,” Cat explains.

“And you’re *definitely* not her type,” Sam elaborates with a slight sneer.

“Oh.” Freddie’s shoulders slump. “So, what’s her boyfriend like? Since I assume I’ll be meeting him,” he adds quickly.

Carly glances at Sam with a smirk. “Oh, she doesn’t have a boyfriend,” she starts, wondering how long it’s going to take Freddie to get it. She actually doesn’t know how he might react to someone being gay; it’s never really come up before.

“She doesn’t? But you...*oh*.”

At least it doesn’t take him very long.

“*Yeah*,” Sam utters with relish. “And her girlfriend? Kinda scary.”

“She’s kind of like Sam, actually,” Cat cuts in.

“Except she carries *scissors*,” Carly finishes dangerously.

“Got it,” Freddie says warily. “Um, she’s never going to find out I said anything about Tori, right?”

“Your secret is safe with me,” Cat whispers, miming locking up her lips.

“I’ll warn you, though,” Sam drawls, clearly amused. “Cat isn’t great at keeping secrets.”

Cat shrugs helplessly. “It’s true,” she sighs.

Freddie looks a little nervous, but he just clears his throat and moves the conversation along gamely. “Carly, when are you flying back to Seattle?”

“Sometime on Monday.” Which was the 23rd. “I don’t know what time. I keep forgetting to ask Spencer to send me my ticket, since he bought it for me.”

“Well, let me know what flight you’re on.”

“You haven’t bought your ticket yet?” Carly asks, alarmed.

“Well, I didn’t know where I was going to be flying out of! Besides, I can always drive if I can’t get a flight.”

“Oh, my god, Freddie.”

“Hey, listen, it’s okay. My mom will pay any price to get me home,” Freddie reassures.

“That I can’t argue with,” Carly admits.

“Well, maybe after Tori’s party we’ll have time to plan something for *iCarly*,” Freddie suggests hopefully. “I have my camera gear in my trunk, so I’m ready to go whenever, wherever.”

Carly glances at Sam, who grimaces slightly. “I dunno,” Carly hedges. “We might not have that much time, really. Especially if you and I still need to figure out our travel plans.”

“Oh, right, okay.” Freddie seems to accept this, and offers, “Well, I was still thinking about coming back here for a week or so after Christmas, if that works for you guys, so maybe we can do something then! Maybe you and I can even pitch some preliminary ideas when we’re traveling, Carly.”

“Maybe,” Carly answers neutrally. “But I always thought Sam had some of the best ideas.”

Sam shrugs modestly. “Just the way my brain works.”

“So we can!” Carly tells Freddie encouragingly. “But I don’t know that we’ll come up with anything *really* good without her.”

“Yeah, you might be right,” Freddie laughs. “I mean, Sam came up with George the Bra, right? That was one of our best ideas.”

“And I even shoplifted the bra for us to use,” Sam says proudly. Carly stares at her, and her surprise must be obvious, because Sam grins awkwardly. “Oh, I never mentioned that before, did I?”

“I guess I just assumed it was your mom’s, but now that I’m saying that out loud, I think I’m happier with you stealing it,” Carly finishes quickly.

Freddie shudders. “Okay, I never had a single thought about where it came from and I was happier that way.”

“Sorry,” Sam smirks, not sounding it at all.

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Freddie is a pretty nice houseguest, at least, Cat thinks so. After dinner, he’s the one who starts clearing the dishes to take to the sink, which prompts Carly to help him, and Cat has to elbow Sam about three times before she finally goes over to oversee things and make sure the dishes are handled to Cat’s standards. Cat appreciates his initiative to be a good houseguest, but she also wants to ensure things are done correctly. Keeping her home environment clean and orderly (despite Sam, who really has gotten better about certain things over time) is one of the things Cat needs to stay balanced in her life.

After dinner, they channel surf and playfully argue about what to watch all together until it gets late. Freddie is yawning—Cat gets it, travel is exhausting—and Carly says her goodbyes and heads home to her apartment. She accepts a hug from Cat, a half-hug from Freddie, and her goodbye to Sam, that includes no hugging, sounds almost natural.

Cat had enjoyed having Carly as a houseguest, too, both this evening and the other night, when she’d been a wolf. Cat already knew that two wolves were pretty much twice the fun, from all the times she’d played with Tori and Sam at Shadow Creek Park. But this time, it had just been her and two wolves. And even though Carly was a relatively new wolf to her, Cat felt comfortable with her, enjoyed her presence, and especially enjoyed watching how happy Sam seemed to be to have her around.

She thought about what Sam had said, that things are simpler between them when they’re wolves. Cat likes that they had another opportunity to just be friends without all the complications of human drama. She likes being able to be around them without thinking about things Sam has said, about lingering feelings, about being afraid of a resurgence of such feelings. She thinks that Sam and Carly are working toward a renewed friendship, and she wants that for them.

She also wants that for herself. Closeness with Carly. She’s not entirely altruistic about this. Cat *loves* having Carly around. She appreciates her dry humor, the way she pushes back subtly against Sam when Sam really needs it, the way her presence in any group situation feels calming, grounding. Cat just plain feels happy when Carly is around.

But Freddie isn’t a bad option, either. He’s helpful, unfailingly polite, and Cat even kind of enjoys the moments in which he clearly annoys Sam, just because he brings out a different side of her that Cat doesn’t get to see that often. Sam can be so careful with her sometimes, Cat likes to remember that there’s a darker side of her, a meaner side, because it makes the contrast of the Sam who adores her stand out all the more.

After Carly leaves, they make sure Freddie is set up on the couch, has what he needs to take a shower in the second bathroom, and they wish him goodnight and head back into their bedroom together.

Sam closes the door firmly and leans against it, looking shell shocked. “I can’t believe this is happening,” she mutters.

“What?” Cat asks, getting her pajamas out from underneath her pillow.

“We have *Freddie* in our apartment!”

“Yeah, I know,” Cat answers cheerfully.

“There ought to be a law,” Sam grumbles darkly.

“A law against what?”

“Against...against having people in your apartment when you want to have sex,” she whispers harshly, face flushing.

“Oh,” Cat answers lightly, feeling her own face heat up. They’d definitely had some great sex the night before, when Sam had taken some wolfsbane, but the power of the full moon clearly hadn’t fully released her yet.

Sam runs a hand through her wild hair in agitation. “I just think Carly should’ve taken him,” she complains needlessly.

“Sam,” Cat admonishes lightly. “Carly needs her privacy, too. At least we have a separate room. She can’t even, like—” her voice drops and she burns brighter as she whispers harshly, “---*masturbate* with him there!”

Sam’s eyes widen and she seems frozen for a moment, and then she mutters. “Oh my god,” and strides across the room to sort through the clothes on her laundry chair, probably looking for her own pajamas. Finally, she says, “Doesn’t make much of a difference, though. We have a separate room, but we still can’t do anything.”

“Why not?”

“He’ll *hear* us!”

“What if we’re quiet?” Cat suggests coyly.

Sam turns to look at her slowly, then scoffs, smirking. “I don’t think you can be that quiet,” she challenges.

“Why don’t we find out?”

Sam doesn’t move. “I don’t know,” she says uncertainly. “I’d kind of hate for this to be the way he finds out I’m so gay.”

“Then maybe we’ll have to make sure I can’t make any noise.” Cat bats her eyes playfully.

Sam’s eyes smolder. “Is that a challenge?”

“It’s just an idea,” Cat replies innocently.

“Yeah, you’re giving me all sorts of ideas right now,” Sam murmurs softly, and everything about her—the intensity of her gaze, the ferocity in her grin, the languid way she moves—makes a shiver of desire run through Cat.

Cat moves closer, as if she’s going to kiss Sam, but she deftly dodges Sam’s lips and whispers in her ear, “Get ready for bed. We’ll wait until we hear the other shower running.”

Luckily, it doesn’t take long before they can hear that Freddie is safely ensconced in the noise-muffling running water in the other bathroom, which is good, because even Cat feels like she’d have trouble waiting much longer. They’ve both finished getting ready for bed when the sound of the water hits her ears, and she and Sam crash together with the intensity of their need, only driven higher by the presence of someone else in the apartment. Someone Cat knows is attracted to her, knows Sam knows is attracted to her, someone who once dated Sam. There’s something perverse but gratifying about taking each other under his nose, in secret, communicating so powerfully to each other how little his attraction means.

It’s even a little cruel, but in the moment, that’s something Cat likes, the way she likes that he brings out that side of Sam. Sam *wanting*, in intense and even dangerous ways, winds Cat up like little else can.

At first, it’s easy to stay quiet, when their lips barely separate. They’re on Cat’s bed, Sam hovering over her, and their clothes are on, just pushed aside, out of the way, hands wandering over skin. Sam is the first to slide her hand into Cat’s pajama pants, and as her fingers press and swirl and find their target, Cat whimpers desperately against Sam’s mouth.

Sam’s fingers stop moving, and she lifts her head. “I thought you could be quiet,” she murmurs dangerously.

“I can,” Cat pants. Sam’s fingers twitch, testing her, and Cat chokes back a moan. “I can,” she repeats, her voice already weaker.

“You’d better,” Sam says darkly, making Cat shiver again.

As she focuses on *not* moaning as Sam’s fingers slip inside of her, Cat retaliates by reaching between their bodies to slide her hands past Sam’s waistband, touching her, catching Sam’s moan in her mouth. “And you were worried about *my* noise,” Cat teases when she pulls away.

Sam shifts, forcing Cat to remove her hand, and presses their bodies closer, her own hand pressed between them, still touching Cat. “Yeah, I’m worried about your noise,” Sam growls. “Because I know I can make you scream when you come like crazy.”

Cat chokes back a whimper at the words, and Sam’s fingers work more frantically, making Cat struggle to keep quiet as she gets closer. Finally, she feels like she has to warn Sam. “I



don't think I can be quiet," she manages, squeezing her eyes shut, prepared for Sam to stop touching her.

But Sam doesn't. Instead, she feels Sam shift her weight, feels Sam's hand cover her mouth. "I'll take care of you," she promises, tone urgent, and Cat knows she means more than keeping her quiet, and she feels the power of Sam's care all through her, and as if that isn't enough, Sam follows that up with, "Let me feel you come," and the words seem to explode in Cat's mind, the command—no, the *request*—like reassurance, and the knowledge that Sam is there to catch her allows Cat to let go, to allow herself to take that freefall into bliss, the sounds she can't hold back muffling against Sam's palm.

It takes her a moment to process that Sam's face is pressed against her shoulder, that she's shuddering and muffling sounds against Cat's pajama top. After a long moment, Sam rolls off to her side, removing her hand from Cat's pajama bottoms, catching her breath.

"Are you okay?" Cat asks, because Sam's face is red, and because she can't quite make sense of anything when she still feels tingles of pleasure jolt through her, her brain still wholly focused on the pleasure she's just come down from.

"Yeah," Sam manages. "I'm great," she chuckles.

Cat suddenly realizes what she means. "You mean you...too?" She still can't quite bring herself to say it. Sometimes it's still hard to talk about this kind of stuff.

Sam nods, expression full of disbelief. "I think so. I mean, I know so. But it...it's not like there was anything that made it happen. I guess I just...came because you did."

Heat and pleasure flare through Cat, enough to make her clench, almost enough to make her completely understand what Sam means, what it's like to have a completely reactionary orgasm. But not quite. Mostly, she just feels flattered and almost arrogantly sexy. "Wow."

"I know," Sam laughs, then leans in to kiss Cat.

And abruptly, Cat hears the water in the other bathroom shut off.

It had been background noise, something she'd utterly forgotten about, but at its absence, horror washes over her. What had been so sexy before, about being with Sam in secret, about getting away with clandestine sex, suddenly just seems rude and an unjustifiable risk. Maybe even *cruel*.

"Oh, my god," Cat utters, gazing at Sam with almost wide-eyed panic.

Somehow, Sam seems to understand what's upset her, and shifts closer, wrapping an arm around her, encouraging Cat to turn onto her side so that Sam can spoon her, tightly. "It's okay," she murmurs. "We didn't do anything wrong."

"What if he heard us?" Cat whispers.

Sam pauses for a long moment, just enough time for the irony to wash over Cat: that the very concern Sam had expressed before Cat seduced her is now what is making Cat feel guilty and

sick. “He couldn’t have,” she finally says, squeezing Cat a little tighter.

“We shouldn’t have done that,” Cat says dully, trying to make sense of this whiplash in her mood, the way her pleasure and the intimate connection she felt so keenly with Sam is suddenly gone, replaced by shame. If *she* hadn’t been so insistent, this wouldn’t have happened. If *she* hadn’t wanted so much, they could have controlled themselves. Why does Cat have to want things that are *bad* for her?

“Well, we did it,” Sam replies. Her tone is soothing, but there is a distinct note of finality to it, of certainty. “We can’t change it. And nothing bad happened.”

Cat takes a very deep breath, willing herself not to cry. There’s the sound of water running again—the sink this time, she thinks. She’d never really thought about how thin the walls are in the apartment. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, don’t be sorry.” Sam sits up, trying to look at Cat. “I had a *great* time, I don’t regret anything. You have nothing to be sorry about.”

But she does. “I’m sorry I’m...like this.” She gestures to herself. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Nothing’s wrong with you,” Sam insists.

It’s nice to hear, but Cat knows it’s a lie. She’d thought she was over this stuff, the times when desire makes her feel *dirty*. And not in that fun, thrilling way when Sam gets a little rough with her and Cat feels overcome by all the passion between them. Dirty in a way where Cat feels like she’s *harmed* someone, maybe just herself, with desires that are bigger than she is, more dangerous. Desires that she worries can’t be justified, even though on the surface, they seem to only bring pleasure. Cat is scared that deep down, that pleasure is masking a harm that can’t be named.

She can’t even really make sense of it, but that part of her that likes Sam’s darkness, that likes the minor cruel streak of affirming their love and connection only a room away from someone whose attraction is known to both of them and not of interest to either of them...it feels like a poisonous display of sensuality. An inverse of jealousy that is somehow just as toxic, even if its target is completely unaware of it.

Cat feels gross. And it’s not something she’s felt after sex for a long time.

But she doesn’t even really know how to tell Sam. Instead, she turns in Sam’s arms, gazing at her but unable to completely meet her eyes. “I guess when it wasn’t happening anymore, it just felt mean.”

Sam’s brows constrict. “To who? To Freddie?” she asks, voice dropping even lower. When Cat nods, she scoffs, slightly. “It wasn’t even about him.”

“I know, but...I don’t know. It kind of was, wasn’t it? It was exciting that we were getting away with something.” Sam looks away, the only confirmation Cat needs that Sam understands. “I don’t like hiding this from him.” Maybe that’s what it really comes down to.

If Freddie knows they're an item, he would at least have context for their need for privacy. But right now, him finding out accidentally presents more of a risk to his feelings than their own.

Sam nods at that. "I really don't either," she admits. She takes a breath. "We'll tell him tomorrow." She laughs, shaking her head. "It's not like we'll be able to hide once we get to Tori's party, anyway."

"I'm sorry," Cat says again. "I didn't mean to ruin this."

"You didn't," Sam assures, drawing her close again. There's a wistful joy in her voice as she murmurs, "I'm never going to forget the time just *feeling* you come got me off."

Cat shivers in her arms, and this time, the feeling is delicious, and it breaks through some of her shame. "I must've been *really* hot," she tries, attempting to tap back into what had been great about their sex mere minutes before.

It kind of works, because it makes her smile, and Sam replies. "Are you kidding? You were *so sexy*. I should make you be quiet more often," she says lowly.

Cat giggles, pushing herself closer to Sam, enjoying her warmth and her affection. Sex is emotional, intense. It's no wonder that sometimes it overwhelms Cat.

But Sam is always there to catch her, steady her, ground her. And she's promised she always will be. Cat falls asleep in her arms, able to move past her shame and let herself be loved in the moment.

The next morning, she wakes up first, as she typically does, and heads up front quietly, in case Freddie isn't awake yet. She starts the coffee as quietly as she can, but still squeaks in surprise a little when she sees Freddie looking at her over the back of the couch.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you," she tells him.

"You didn't," he assures her, sitting up fully. "I've been awake for a bit but hadn't gotten up yet. I guess I'm still adjusting to being able to sleep in. I had early classes this semester."

"Not me," Cat shakes her head. "I always had to be up extra early to make it to school on time in high school. I gave myself a later start for college." She opens the fridge to assess what to make for breakfast. "Plus, with Sam coming with me, it would be impossible to go anywhere before, like, ten."

Freddie gets up from the couch to go sit at the kitchen island. His hair is rumpled from sleep, making him look like a little boy, a stark contrast to the way the sleeves of his t-shirt are tight over his biceps and shoulders. He really is easy on the eyes. It's not as though spending all that time with him in order to make Sam jealous last year had been *torture*. "So, Sam goes to school with you? What are you studying, anyway?"

"Well, she doesn't go *with* me like that, we just go to the same college. So we can carpool. I'm still deciding if I want to focus on acting or singing, and Sam is taking all the art classes

she can. She says she's not really getting a degree, just wants to do art."

Freddie smiles softly. "That sounds like Sam."

There's a moment, there, when Cat wonders if she should say something. Freddie's obvious affection for Sam could very easily be attributed to their friendship—and Cat is almost certain it is—but there's a small part of her that feels defensive at the idea that maybe it's based on more than that. Instead, what she says is, "I guess Sam didn't mention it."

Freddie shakes his head. "She hasn't mentioned much of anything lately," he admits. "I get it," he adds quickly. "New stage of life, in new places. It's natural to grow apart a little. It's not like I reached out much, either."

"Yeah," Cat agrees. Now she feels guilty for her impulse. She hates the idea of growing apart from her high school friends. That's part of what this break is all about, spending as much time all together to keep their connections strong. Freddie is here to do the same thing, and Cat can understand that. "How do you take your coffee?" she asks instead, to move the topic along.

"A little cream and sugar," Freddie replies, and any awkwardness between them fades away as they sip coffee and Cat begins to make bacon and eggs.

Sam emerges not long after, probably summoned by the smell of breakfast, and she's her usual grumpy morning self. Cat knows it's way too early for any kind of conversation with Freddie about their relationship—and she's glad she didn't spill the beans herself, since it's really Sam's revelation to share with her friend. But by the time Sam has fully woken up with a steady supply of coffee, bacon and eggs, and cartoons, she and Cat both need showers to get ready for the day, and by the time they're finished with showers, Carly is on her way over. The plan had been for her to come over around lunch time, so they could all hang out with Freddie before they went to Tori's party that evening.

And once Carly is there, Cat and Sam exchange a glance, and it's clear they both agree that they've missed their window to talk to Freddie about their relationship. Having the conversation with Carly there, too, could only open up awkward questions for Carly, and make Freddie feel even more out of the loop in his friends' lives than he clearly already does.

They end up walking around the Venice Beach boardwalk for a little while, to kill some time and start to show Freddie some of the city. In spite of the fact that he's been here a few times, he hasn't seen a whole lot of Los Angeles. They have a good time with the sightseeing, and while Carly gets in line with Freddie while he buys an overpriced t-shirt as a souvenir, Sam and Cat have a moment to chat off to the side.

"How are we going to tell him?" Cat asks.

Sam's mouth twists in frustration. "I don't know. I kinda forgot about it this morning," she admits.

"Well, you did say it's not like we can hide at the party," Cat sighs.

“Yeah. I’m going to act the same as we always do at the party,” Sam affirms. Which is nice, because they’ve been keeping their distance around Freddie, a little, as they’ve waited for the right moment to tell him. Cat misses their moments of affection.

“Me, too,” Cat agrees.

Sam looks thoughtful. “I wonder if we should warn him.”

“Warn him about what?”

“That he’s about to go to a party where just about everyone is...not straight.”

“Is that a problem?” Cat wonders.

Sam shrugs. “I dunno. I doubt it. Maybe he might feel out of place. But maybe it would be weirder to just...call it out like that.”

Cat considers this, remembering the way Sam had felt when she’d first been getting to know Cat’s friends. Even though she’s someone who certainly has experience with performance, she had felt like she couldn’t understand or connect with Cat’s friends. Cat knows it had been more complex than that—undercurrents of werewolf rivalry and insecurity about class had contributed as well. But at the least, maybe Freddie should at least know what kind of high school Cat had attended. If he makes inferences about sexuality, too, then he’ll be even more prepared.

“Maybe I can at least make sure he knows I went to Hollywood Arts. So he’ll at least understand we’re a bunch of theater kids.”

Sam shrugs, but doesn’t have a chance to respond before Carly and Freddie are rejoining them.

Carly is their designated driver tonight, and after dinner they pile into her car to head across the city to Tori’s house. Carly’s car is an older Volkswagen Beetle that Sam always gives an admiring pat whenever she sees it—or, she has the couple of times they’ve been around Carly’s car, anyway. Carly’s clearly very fond of it, but Cat wonders if part of the reason Carly walks so much is because this car is kind of old. Cat remembers all the times her brother’s old Cadillac would break down on him, and wonders if Carly shares her reluctance to trust old cars.

But the old VW seems to run fine. Cat can tell that Sam is itching to ask questions about it, since this is the first time they’ve actually ridden in it, but it would seem suspicious to Freddie if Sam is not well-acquainted with Carly’s car. So she holds back.

Instead, Cat says, “So, Freddie, this party is mostly for my friends from high school. I can’t remember if I told you that I went to a performing arts high school.”

Sam, sitting in the passenger seat next to Carly, glances over her shoulder at Cat. Cat can tell from her expression that she thinks Cat bringing this up out of nowhere sounds suspicious.

But Freddie doesn't seem to think so. "Oh, right, I remember something like that from back when we were researching Tori."

"Cyberstalking her, you mean," Carly cuts in.

"It was all publicly available information!" Freddie argues. He turns back to Cat, frowning thoughtfully. "What was it called? Something Hollywood, right?"

Cat realizes he means her high school. "We went to Hollywood Arts!"

"That's right!" Freddie snaps his fingers. "You had your own social networking site. Kind of cool, actually."

"Yeah, The Slap!" Cat says excitedly. She misses using The Slap. Alumni can keep their accounts, but people generally move on to Splashface or other sites in college, because then they can post more freely without worrying about breaking school rules and having their accounts suspended.

"It seems like an interesting school," Freddie offers. "Has to be more interesting than where we went to school, anyway."

"Definitely," Sam grunts.

"I dunno," Carly says pensively. "There's really nowhere else where you can find someone like Miss Briggs."

"And that's a *plus*?" Sam asks incredulously.

Freddie shudders. "She would *never* stop talking to me about you two after you left. And she was *always* watching me. Like she thought I would start misbehaving to take over for you two! It was awful."

"I'm sorry," Carly replies, glancing in the rearview mirror.

"I'm not," Sam refutes. "You never do anything anyway, so it's not like her watching you would've made any difference."

Freddie looks indignant. "You don't know what I might've gotten into senior year!"

"What, the chess club?" Sam ribs.

"Sam," Carly says. Her tone is mild, but it's a reprimand.

Cat quickly shifts the subject back to her friends. "Well, I thought I'd let you know, because they say theater kids know how to party."

"I'll bet," Freddie replies eagerly, clearly happy to leave the other topic behind.

But Sam isn't done picking on him. "This is probably the only cool party Freddie has ever attended."

“Hey, I thought we threw some pretty cool parties back in Seattle.” Carly sounds offended.

“I’m not talking about cool, like, Crazy Hat party cool,” Sam replies. “I meant cool, like, college cool.”

“I’ll have you know that I’ve attended *plenty* of parties at Stanford,” Freddie says airily, puffing out his chest.

“What, do they have a train geek club there, too?” Sam shoots back.

“Sam,” Carly says again, with a little more bite to it this time.

“No,” Freddie answers evenly. “I went to frat parties. Because I almost pledged.”

“You?” It’s Carly who sounds shocked, though Cat can tell she doesn’t mean it to sound insulting.

Freddie seems a little insulted though as he answers defensively, “Is that such a surprise?”

“I mean, *yeah*,” Carly replies. She shakes her head. “Sorry, I just never would have seen you as a frat boy type.”

“There are lots of different kinds of frats,” Freddie explains patiently. “There was one that I felt like I might fit in with. Okay, yes, fine, it’s considered a ‘nerd frat,’” he concedes. “But one thing all frats have in common is they know how to throw a party.” Freddie settles back into his seat, looking superior. “Have you guys been to any frat parties?” he asks.

“No,” Sam admits through her teeth. “But community college doesn’t have frats. Besides, there’s nothing there that interests me.”

Before Freddie can ask about that, Carly replies, “I haven’t either, though I thought about it a few times when people would invite me. But being a commuter makes it harder to get involved with stuff sometimes.”

“I see,” Freddie answers. Cat knows the note of superiority in his voice must be driving Sam insane.

“So why didn’t you join one?” Carly asks.

“Oh.” This seems to make Freddie deflate a little. “I guess it was...what with spending all my time with Gibby and Spencer the last year or so...I think I was a little ‘bro’d’ out. I...kinda missed having female friends. And I wasn’t sure joining a frat was going to get me very many of those. Especially at a school with more men enrolled already.”

“Aww,” Carly croons.

“Well, when you can’t get a girlfriend, you can at least try for a ‘female friend,’” Sam drawls.

“*Sam.*” This time it’s both Cat *and* Carly reprimanding her in unison. She doesn’t defend herself and behaves for the rest of the car ride.

At this point Cat isn't really sure if her hints about theater kids have landed with Freddie whatsoever, but there doesn't seem to be a way to bring it back to that topic, because now they're all chatting about college experiences: classes, people they've met, what they've enjoyed learning about, and, in the case of Carly and Freddie, what's different about living in California. Well, Cat tried. She hopes she doesn't have to worry too much about Freddie's reaction.

When they arrive at Tori's, Robbie's car—a minivan older than any of them that Beck helped him fix recently—is already parked in the driveway. This is a sure sign that Robbie is acting as the designated driver for the guys tonight, since Beck generally drives everywhere in other circumstances, and Robbie has lamented to Cat that Beck won't let him drive his car. Robbie likes having transportation, but he says it's impossible to feel cool driving a minivan.

Cat wonders if maybe she should start considering getting a driver's license of her own. It just has never felt like a priority to her. And, to be honest, driving scares her a little.

Jade answers the door, her expression brightening marginally at the sight of them. "Finally," she snarks, stepping aside to invite them in.

"Oh, hey guys!" Tori greets from the kitchen, already hustling closer. "You brought Freddie!" she announces unnecessarily.

"Well, we said we would, didn't we?" Sam asks rhetorically. "But if you need to keep out the riff raff, we can always toss him outside."

"Don't be silly," Tori chuckles, not even playing along with Sam's constant need to antagonize Freddie. Freddie just rolls his eyes tolerantly. "It's nice to see you again!" Tori says politely to Freddie.

"You, too! Thanks for having me over," Freddie replies.

"I'm not sure who else you know here," Tori glances behind her, where Beck, Robbie, and Andre have gotten up from the sofa, anticipating greetings.

"We've met!" Robbie interrupts excitedly. He seems to sense immediately that he's been a bit too enthusiastic, because he shoves his hands in his pockets and hunches his shoulders a little. "Hi there," he greets more neutrally, nodding at Freddie. "I'm Robbie," he reminds him.

"Yes, I remember," Freddie replies, a touch of heaviness in his voice.

"Beck." His greeting is as easy and straightforward as the handshake he offers Freddie.

"Hey, I'm Andre." Andre offers a handshake, too, but he seems less comfortable about it, like maybe he decided to do it because Beck did.

Freddie looks at him curiously. "We haven't met? You look...kinda familiar."

Andre's expression turns stoic, almost blank, which Cat knows means he's annoyed, but before he can reply, Robbie bursts out, "Maybe you remember him from that party we all



attended at Kenan Thompson's house! Andre was the host."

"I guess that must be it." Freddie seems doubtful, but he looks keenly at Andre. "So you know Kenan?"

"Yeah, I mean. Sort of. Not really." Andre unravels quickly as he finally admits. "My uncle worked with him." He realizes how that sounds and amends, "In real estate. That's how I was able to use his house for the party."

"Ooh," Freddie nods. "That's cool." He still looks like he might be trying to place Andre, but then Tori pulls his focus toward Jade.

"And this is my girlfriend, Jade," she introduces, wrapping her arm around Jade's waist.

"We've met," Jade states evenly.

"Yep, we have. Hi," Freddie greets, standing up a little straighter and looking at her apprehensively.

Jade's head tilts and she smirks a little, seeming to sense Freddie's discomfort. "Last time I saw you, you and Robbie were being mauled by a bunch of fanged fish. Looks like you healed up pretty well."

"Um, thank you," Freddie answers.

"Yep. I'll never forget the day Frobbie fell into that vat of Kansas Razorback Tuna," Jade reminisces fondly.

Cat glances at Sam, a mix of emotions swirling through her at the memory. The agony of their huge blowout fight, the sweetness of their first kiss, the heartache of the aftermath, in which Sam pulled away and told Cat she couldn't be with her. It happened less than a year ago, but feels like so much longer, with how much has occurred since that moment.

But it's Beck who responds to Jade's mildly sadistic nostalgia. "Frobbie?" he asks, frowning.

"Oh!" Robbie answers. "You see, Freddie and I spent a lot of time together when he was in town last time, and as we got to know each other, we realized that if you combine our names, it becomes '*Frobbie*.' See? Freddie, Robbie, Frobbie?" He grins, a bit awkwardly.

"I get it," Beck replies quickly, eyes darting between the two men.

Robbie seems to read the suspicion that Beck isn't even trying to hide, and laughs, but it sounds false. "Oh, it wasn't like *that*," he scoffs, touching Beck on the arm. "In fact, I tried to fight Freddie before we found some common ground as a basis for friendship," Robbie holds his head up proudly.

Beck looks at Freddie askance, and Freddie nods gravely. "It's true," he affirms. "He did...try to punch me."

Beck's mouth tugs into a half-smile. "You tried to take him on?" he asks Robbie affectionately, then shakes his head. "You are so..." he trails off.

"I'm so what?" Robbie asks, looking puzzled.

"Nothing," Beck answers, pulling Robbie closer to press a kiss to his temple.

Cat meets Sam's gaze for a brief moment before she shifts to watch Freddie out of the corner of her eye for a reaction, hoping it might offer some kind of clue that might let them know what to expect when Freddie inevitably finds out about them.

Freddie blinks a few times as he witnesses the mild display of affection between Beck and Robbie, and watches them curiously for a moment, but he does not seem repulsed, or upset, or even that surprised. Maybe Cat's mild warning *had* paved the way a little.

Carly rubs her hands together eagerly and asks Tori, "Do you have anything to drink?"

"Oh, I definitely got a few things that my dad is willing to turn a blind eye to," Tori answers with a grin. It seems that now that they're all in college, Tori's parents have become even more lax with their rules. "And Beck brought some weed that smells *incredible*."

"I know," Carly replies, then catches herself (because Cat certainly can't smell any weed, just here in Tori's living room). "I just mean, I'm not surprised."

"Beck knows what's good," Jade adds, maybe helping to cover Carly's error with some flattery. Beck smiles at her, and it seems to work. Cat knows that a rare compliment from Jade can be quite a big deal.

"I'm driving tonight, though," Carly says, as if reminding herself.

"Oh, that's right," Tori nods. "Don't worry, we have plenty of sodas and juices and stuff, too. And snacks."

"Cat," Robbie stops her from following the others over to the Vega refrigerator. "Beck was just asking me the other day about that song we sang for him, about the time Andre spilled urine in his car."

"Why would you bring that up?" Andre asks, scandalized.

"Because it was a good song," Beck replies mildly. "Besides, I got the smell out eventually."

"I'm sorry...what?" Freddie asks.

"Don't ask," Andre mutters.

"No, I'm going to ask." It's Tori who cuts in. "Because I have no idea what Beck is talking about."

Andre sighs. As he begins to explain the incident in which he spilled urine in Beck's car, Sam comes over to Cat and asks quietly, "You want something to drink? Tori's got hard

lemonade.”

Cat has never really had any interest in getting drunk, maybe because she feels a bit out of control half of the time when she’s sober, but she can’t help but be tempted by drinks that taste sweet and delicious instead of bitter and unpleasantly tangy the way a lot of alcohol is. “Yeah, I’ll have one! Thanks.” Cat squeezes Sam’s arm affectionately as she walks away.

“Anyway,” Robbie returns to questioning Cat. “How did that song go?”

“I’m trying to think,” Cat starts. “I can remember the song we did for Trina.”

“Don’t say her name, you might summon her,” Tori says darkly.

She and Robbie hum a few lines, trying to recall the melody they’d made up for their song to Beck, when Sam comes over and hands Cat her hard lemonade.

“Thank you,” Cat smiles and, because it feels natural in the moment, and also because it’s high time to make the reveal, she leans over to give Sam a peck on the lips.

“No problem,” Sam replies when they pull apart, but her eyes are bright, and Cat knows she’s eager and nervous to know Freddie’s reaction as she slips her arm around Cat’s waist to stand next to her, both of them able to observe him somewhat discreetly.

Unlike the reveal of Beck and Robbie, Freddie looks *shocked*. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open slightly, though he recovers quickly enough and takes a healthy swig of beer to cover his reaction. Cat can feel him staring at them as she tries to refocus on Robbie and they begin to piece together the song they sang for Beck.

She glances over and meets Sam’s eyes a few moments later. She raises her eyebrows and smiles slightly, an expression Cat reads as *Well, that went about as well as it could have*.

-

Sam keeps telling herself she doesn’t care about Freddie’s reaction to the reveal of her sexuality, or her relationship with Cat, or whichever nuance of that moment clearly shocked him so much. But the truth is, she *does*. She’s known Freddie for a long time, and though she resisted the idea for years, he’s her friend. At one time, she would have considered him a close friend, though they have some work to do if that’s a position he’s going to inhabit once again.

It’s why she so easily put off telling him verbally, why she decided to just let a small moment do the coming out for her. The idea of actually *telling* Freddie that she’s so gay just feels... complicated, on so many levels. Not just because they once dated, which was such a brief thing that happened for reasons that, for Sam, had very little to do with Freddie himself, but also because they know each other so well, and this is a secret Sam has kept. For good reason, but it’s a way that Sam kept Freddie from getting close to her, kept him out of her inner life. She and Carly both did, and there’s a lot of pain in that decision. The last thing Sam wants is for Freddie to feel like Sam used him.

Because she did. And maybe she's finally grown up enough to really feel bad about it.

So Sam had been happy to let Cat kiss her, briefly, in front of their friends, the way they have so many times before. Just a brief moment of connection, really no different from the affection Beck and Robbie shared minutes before. And with that, coming out is off her plate. Freddie knows. Well, he knows the most important thing, anyway, that she and Cat are together. The fact that Sam isn't into men at all? That isn't *crucial* knowledge.

But it does make Sam feel like a coward, a little bit. She can't think of another time in her life in which she's avoided telling someone something because she was afraid of their reaction. At least, that's what she thinks at first, until she remembers the way she hid her crush on Carly for years, the way she avoided getting close to Cat as they began to fall in love, believing that Cat would never accept her as a werewolf. Okay, when it comes to matters of the heart, maybe Sam *is* a bit of a coward. But what else is she supposed to do, when rejection hurts so much? That's exactly why she's so aggressive and confrontational about everything else. Walls let you reject other people before they can reject you.

Whatever weed Beck brought must be heady as shit, because Sam has been swimming in her own thoughts for half the party, nodding along to the music Andre and Tori, and then Robbie and Cat, are playing, vaguely listening in on conversations. Andre, who at first seems to be a little unsure about Freddie, warms up to him quickly once the alcohol starts flowing, especially since Freddie has all sorts of tips about technical questions Andre has regarding recording himself playing music. At least Freddie managed to find the only other straight person here.

At a certain point, when Robbie and Cat are making up songs together, Carly leans over to Sam. "Hey, you okay?" she asks quietly.

Sam looks at her, and in that moment, it's as if nothing has changed between them since they were twelve, and Carly is her best friend, who she loves very deeply, who has never broken her heart. "Yeah," she says quietly. "Just kinda in my head. Must be the weed."

"Yeah, it's one of those strains." Tori's voice comes from behind her, and she sits on Sam's other side on the couch. Sam hadn't even noticed that Tori was close by. And maybe Tori herself hadn't noticed that, even though she could probably easily hear Carly's question to Sam, it was supposed to be private. "You need anything?" she asks Sam.

Sam shakes her head and chuckles softly. "Nah, I'm fine. Just gotta get out of my head a little."

"Oh, I can help with that," Carly says in a low voice. Sam's head whips toward her as she tries to understand what she means, and sees Carly is wearing a mischievous grin.

That can only mean one thing. Well, it can mean a few things, but with the fact that they aren't dating anymore... "Don't you dare," Sam growls.

Carly lunges for her, tickling her sides, and Sam thrashes away from her, but on her other side, Tori quickly picks up the game, and for a moment, it seems like there might be an

impromptu werewolf wrestling match on the couch, but Sam manages to leap to her feet and away from the two of them.

“Nope!” she calls, holding her hands out in front of herself defensively. “Not gonna happen.”

Carly just smiles enigmatically. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Sam hates to admit it, but she’s right. She’s a *lot* less in her head after suddenly flailing around on the couch, trying to avoid her ex’s hands, and the hands of one of her best friends. Still, she scowls. “*Never*. Again,” she says emphatically.

“Okay,” Carly holds up her hands, looking remorseful and slightly defensive.

“I’ll make sure Tori keeps her hands to herself,” Jade says as she sidles up next to Sam, eyes scanning her as she wears a highly amused smirk. What is going on today, that Sam is barely aware of who’s around her and whose attention she has? Because she’s realizing that *everyone* was privy to the tickling that just happened. Damn. She likes weed most of the time, but she’s never felt so deep in her own head before that she can’t even pay attention to her senses.

But refocusing absolutely helps, and now that Sam isn’t so introspective, she decides entertaining their friends is the best way to move past her own embarrassment, and challenges Robbie to a freestyle battle. At first, Robbie seems deeply reticent, insists he can’t do it, that Rex is the one with talent. Eventually, Beck rolls his eyes and goes out to Robbie’s van and brings in the dummy, and after an awkward argument between Robbie and Rex, it’s on.

And when Beck takes Rex away after a few rounds, leaving Robbie to perform on his own, it takes him a few attempts, but he finally seems to tap into whatever wit he possesses when he’s controlling Rex. It’s honestly kind of exciting to see the awkward young man almost visibly grow more confident. Sam almost lets him win. Almost. But she’s still Sam Puckett, so she can’t. Competition is as natural to her as breathing. She’s *always* felt like she has something to prove.

Now that Sam is actually a part of it, the rest of the party is great. There’s tons of good food, a lot of great conversation, so much laughter. There’s Cat finally finishing her one drink and sitting on Sam’s lap, snuggling with her and refusing to move for so long that Sam actually thinks she might have fallen asleep until she says something. There’s more music, funny Splashface videos.

There’s even Trina, who shows up as things are reaching full chaos, and looks around the room, scandalized. “*Tori!*” she shouts, “You’re having a *party?*”

“That’s what they call it, yeah,” Tori replies scornfully. “I know you’ve never been invited to one, so good guess! And, you’re not invited to this one, either.”

But Trina just folds her arms. “I’m telling Dad!” A mild hush comes over the partygoers, wondering if they’re about to get into trouble.

“Go ahead,” Tori shoots back, standing her ground. “It’s not as if Dad doesn’t know *everything* that goes on in this house, anyway.” She raises her eyebrows at Trina.

Trina looks pale, then red, but then she notices Freddie. “Well, who’s this hunk of dude?” she asks, stepping *right* over to him to grab his bicep. “I’m Trina.”

“Freddie,” he answers warily.

“You don’t have to talk to her, she’s leaving,” Tori cuts in fiercely.

“What’s your story?” Trina asks, ignoring her sister.

“Um, I’m friends with Carly and Sam, down for a visit.”

Trina glances at both girls, looks briefly murderous, before asking, “Where are you from?”

“Seattle, but I’m in school right now. Stanford. I’m studying computer science.”

“Oh.” Trina’s face falls immediately, and she starts to walk away without another word, when Jade intercepts her.

“Now, wait a minute,” Jade says quietly, pulling Trina toward her.

“Ew,” Trina yanks her arm away. “What?” she asks harshly.

Jade speaks to Trina quietly, so quietly that Sam is pretty sure only the werewolves in the room will overhear it. “He may be studying some nerd science, but that means he’s gonna be rich someday.”

Trina perks up. “You are *so* right. I don’t know what you’re doing with my sister.” And with that jab, she heads right back over to Freddie.

Jade looks very satisfied with herself, and Sam appreciates the sadistic approach to hazing Freddie with Trina’s presence. “Nice job,” she admits to Jade.

Jade shrugs. “Eh, I was pretty sure it would work. Trina likes pretty guys, and look at him, he’s basically a porcelain doll.”

Now that Jade has said it, Sam can’t unsee it, and she starts laughing, and can’t stop. This sets Jade off, too, and both of them can’t look at each other without laughing for several long minutes. This is the part about weed that Sam loves, and she’s glad she’s reached this stage of high.

Meanwhile, she can’t tell if Freddie is just being polite, or if he might be at least a little bit interested in Trina’s very focused attention on him. Sam hopes it’s the former, because much as she enjoys tormenting Freddie, she’s pretty sure an actual relationship with Trina would be painful for him, and not in a funny way.

Eventually, Tori makes Trina go away, and apologizes to Freddie, who just shrugs and goes back to talking with Beck and Robbie about his car. Sam can’t help but smile a little. She

likes that Freddie is fitting in, that he's finding points of connection with even the people he's just met. This is kind of the best outcome Sam pictured for his visit, and she's happy it's becoming a reality.

But eventually, the party starts to wind down and wrap up. The guests (mostly Carly and Robbie, since they're sober) help clean up a little bit, until Tori assures them that it's fine, that they should head home before the drivers are too tired. There are hugs, everyone enthusing about what a great time they had, while Jade ushers people out impatiently, clearly ready for some alone time with Tori. Out in the driveway, they pile into their cars, calling goodbyes to each other. Beck and Andre, who both just met Freddie, both express that they hope they see him again while he's in town, and Freddie enthusiastically responds that he hopes so, too.

The drive home carries the energy of the party for a while, but the closer they get to Sam and Cat's apartment, the more everyone starts to wind down. Freddie asks some questions about some of the people he met tonight, they talk and laugh about the fun they've had. By the time they get home, though, Sam can see that Cat is starting to fall asleep in the back seat, and even Freddie is staring out the window pensively.

"Thanks for driving," Sam tells Carly as she pulls in behind the apartment.

"Sure." Carly gives her a sleepy smile. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Sam doesn't open her car door, even as Freddie and Cat start hauling themselves out of the back seat. "You okay to get home?" she asks Carly.

Carly nods. "Yeah, I'll be fine. Don't worry about me."

Sam wonders if she's ever not worried about Carly, even when she'd been pretending she never wanted to see her again. "Right. Okay. See you tomorrow." She gets out of Carly's car without another word.

There isn't much more conversation as Cat, Freddie and Sam head into the apartment and start readying themselves for bed, just some mumbled goodnights, and before long, Sam is wrapped around Cat in bed, asleep within moments.

She wakes up a few hours later because she has to pee. It feels like clawing through cobwebs just to force herself out of bed through the haze of her sleepy brain. But once she's up, she realizes she's hungry. The snacks at Tori's feel like hours ago. They *were* hours ago, she realizes.

Sam pads to the kitchen for a snack, grunting and rummaging through the refrigerator, singularly focused on her need for something to eat. It isn't until she closes the refrigerator door that she abruptly remembers Freddie, abruptly identifies the scent of him across the room, and feels his eyes on her.

She turns around, slowly. He's sitting up on the couch, squinting at her tiredly, looking confused.

Sam holds up a tupperware container of lunchmeat ham. “Want some?” she asks.

Freddie shakes his head. “What? Ew. No. Thank you,” he adds as an afterthought.

“Whatever,” Sam mumbles. She peels away a few slices of ham from the stack and stuffs them in her mouth, brain waking up enough to consider her options. She should just take her food and go. Cat doesn’t *love* when she brings food into the bedroom in the middle of the night, but as long as it stays out of her bed, it should be okay. She also probably wouldn’t love Sam finishing this entire stack of ham slices, but Sam can put them in the minifridge in her room after her snack. She won’t have to finish all of them.

But before she can actually make her escape, Freddie is sitting up further, leaning on the back on the couch, scrutinizing her.

“What?” Sam asks, through a mouthful of meat.

“So,” Freddie starts in a sleep-roughened voice. “You and Cat, huh?”

Sam narrows her eyes and swallows the bite she’s working on. “Yeah. What about it?”

Freddie shakes his head slowly, still staring at her. It makes Sam bristle. But then he just smiles and says. “I guess...I get it. I do. You two are great together. I’m really happy for you.”

Sam wonders why everyone from her past has to say that to her. “Great, thanks,” she snaps. “Just what I need. The Freddie Benson seal of approval.”

“I’m being serious,” Freddie says tiredly, not even biting back at her sarcasm. “You and Cat just...make sense. I guess I just wanted you to know I’m not...weird about it.”

Sam subsides a little, because the truth is, she *was* a little worried about Freddie being weird. She knows his verbal assurance isn’t the same thing as the truth, but she figures, if Freddie is willing to put the sentiment out there, it’s a step. “Thanks,” she responds, more genuinely this time. She closes up the tupperware container and slides it back into the fridge, her appetite sated more quickly than she expected. “Go to sleep, Fredward.”

“I *was*,” he grumbles irritably as he lies back down on the sofa.



## Cleverness = Perseverance

The next day, Carly heads over to Sam and Cat's apartment in the late morning. The plan is to explore some of the more touristy stuff downtown—the Hollywood Walk of Fame, seeing the Hollywood sign, and, because Freddie is a big nerd, the La Brea Tar Pits. Carly's actually kind of fascinated by this as well, and she hasn't gotten around to visiting it since she moved here, so while Sam drags her feet and Cat encourages her along, Carly is right next to Freddie, staring at the tar pit laid out before them like an oddly viscous swamp, and later, examining all the fossil displays in the museum.

After their day downtown, though, they head back to Sam and Cat's apartment, so Freddie can gather his belongings to prepare to stay at Carly's for the next two nights, until they leave to head up to Seattle for Christmas.

They'd gotten their travel arrangements figured out the previous day; it had turned out that Spencer had forgotten to buy Carly's plane ticket home, and finding a flight for both of them was turning out to be difficult and expensive, so they'd decided to drive up to Seattle together instead. Sure, it's a long drive, but Spencer had taken all of them this distance more than once, in an RV, no less. Carly and Freddie figure they can handle it; they're young, they can take turns napping and load up on caffeine.

But for now, Carly is trying to help Freddie get situated in her small studio apartment. "Um, okay. So, my bed is over here, and you'll be sleeping on the couch. I think it's about the same length as Sam's couch, though, sorry."

"It's okay." Freddie sits down on it, bouncing slightly. "I think it's a little softer."

"Probably." Carly smiles. "I'm pretty sure that couch from the TV show isn't made for comfort."

"You got that right."

"Uh, so, right. Bathroom is obviously over there, through the only door." Even her closet is through the bathroom door, opening onto a tiny stretch of hardwood floor barely qualifying as a hallway before meeting the tiled floor of the bathroom. Actually, as annoying as the placement of her closet is, it kind of makes this easier, since she's already used to changing clothes in her bathroom. "And everything else, you can already see." She waves a hand at her apartment as a whole.

"Right." Freddie nods. "Thanks for letting me stay here. I know it's kind of tight."

"Sure, it's no problem. It gives us some more time to catch up." Carly grins.

Freddie smiles back. "Seems like we'll have plenty of time for that on our drive home."

"Still, it might be nice to have a change of scenery!" Carly gestures around them. "A... smaller, more boring change of scenery. I have *got* to get around to decorating this place,"

she scolds herself.

“It’s fine, really,” Freddie assures her. “It wasn’t, like, weird, or bad, at Sam’s, but still, it’s nice to be here with you. I mean, we’ve always been better friends than I was with Sam.”

“Fair enough,” Carly concedes. “But Sam always cared about you, in her own way.”

Freddie snorts. “What way was that? ‘He’s not your punching bag, he’s my punching bag’?” He shakes his head. “No, I know you’re right. We’ve always been friends, it was just different. You and I can actually *talk*. Sam and I...” He shrugs.

“Sam can be...guarded. Even with me.” Carly sits next to Freddie on the couch.

“Yeah, I guess.” Freddie is looking away from her, at the blank TV. “You know, I think I get why she didn’t want to tell me about her and Cat. But that doesn’t mean it felt good to find out like I did and realize she didn’t *want* to tell me.”

“Freddie,” Carly says sympathetically. She settles a little closer to him on the couch. “I think Sam *did* want to tell you,” Carly discloses. “She just wasn’t really sure how you’d react. You two have history.”

Freddie scoffs. “Some history. There was never anything real between us.”

Carly is a little surprised. Sure, she’d never really thought Sam was *actually* interested in Freddie, but she had thought Freddie might’ve liked her. “Really? But I thought...” She finds she can’t actually *say* that she thought they’d loved each other, not when she knows it isn’t true.

Freddie shrugs. “Sam is—okay, she’s beautiful. It’s not the first thing people notice about her, but I noticed. And she’s...dynamic and interesting and kinda mysterious and she loves so deeply, and when I thought some of that was pointing *my* way? Of course I was interested. But in retrospect I can’t say I ever really loved her. And I don’t think she loved me, either. When you love someone, you don’t fight all the time. You can talk to each other. Spend time together. Sam and I only ever had one thing in common, and that was you.”

Carly’s heart is thrumming nervously, because the way Freddie is talking, she’s worried about where this is going, whether his old crush on her is still lingering. Especially if he’s going to be sleeping in her apartment and driving her home to Seattle. So she changes the subject. “She wanted to tell you. I know she did. But I think also, nothing like this had ever come up before, and none of us knew if you’d be...okay.”

Freddie looks surprised. “She thought I’d be upset that she’s...gay?” He says the word like he’s taking a stab at it. Carly nods, wondering, too, for her own sake, how Freddie is going to explain himself. But Freddie just shakes his head, looking past Carly thoughtfully. “It was a surprise, is all. It’s not that I have anything against it. I just wish she’d told me. But I guess, I also get how it might feel like there’s no good way to come out. I think she and Cat are great together. And I hope she never finds out I think Cat is hot.”

“Oh, don’t worry, she knows.”

“Oh. Great.” Freddie nods, mouth firm. “My days are numbered, then.”

“Oh, come on. It’s not like it’s *news*. I mean, look at Cat!”

“I know, I know,” Freddie groans. “I just know Sam!” He settles back into the couch, looking amused and a little pensive. “I guess it was a little more than just the realization about Sam, though.”

“What do you mean?” Carly shifts to look at him more directly, leaning back against the arm of the sofa.

“I think it was a cumulative effect,” Freddie states factually. “You know, cumulative, the increase of—”

“I know what it means,” Carly interrupts, but then her brow furrows. “Wait, but what do *you* mean?”

“I mean that, you know, first there was Tori and Jade. And while Tori wasn’t a surprise because we’d talked about her, Jade was a little. Because I’d met her, even if it was brief, and I had *no* idea.” Carly fights a smile, because Jade had *absolutely* not been a surprise to her. But maybe bisexuality recognized bisexuality. “And then Beck and Robbie,” Freddie continues, “and, okay, Robbie was *certainly* not a surprise. I kind of picked up on it when we met last time. Beck, also not that much of a surprise. But I was just starting to feel a little outnumbered, when Sam kissed Cat. And, it’s not a problem for me, to be around a lot of, uh, not straight people. But it’s new for me.”

“You did fine,” Carly reassures. She hesitates, wondering if she should seize her moment.

But just as she decides maybe it isn’t the right time, Freddie notices her expression. “What?” he asks.

“It’s nothing.”

“No, what?” he pushes. “Did I say something wrong? I don’t know all the right terms and things. I mean, I’ve seen stuff, but I never really took the time to learn about it before.”

“No, you were fine,” Carly reiterates. “It’s just kind of funny. What you were saying about how being around queer people is new for you.”

Freddie’s brow furrows, but then his face relaxes as he laughs. “Okay, you’re right, I’ve been around Sam for years. But she isn’t a group.”

“No, but...she and I outnumbered you.”

Carly watches as Freddie’s eyes slowly widen in shock. “You’re *gay*?” he asks, astonished.

Carly smiles, trying not to laugh, because it would only feel like she was laughing at him. “No. But I am bisexual.”

“Oh. Ooh. *Oh!*” Freddie seems to process that in a few distinct moments.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, either,” Carly tells him honestly as he sits and clearly reassesses his entire history with his two closest friends.

“No, I—I get it.” He shakes his head. “It’s just, I guess what they say about theater kids is true. Kind of funny that you and Sam managed to fall in with them.”

“Well,” Carly explains. “They say that sometimes queer people are just drawn to each other, even before they’re out. Like they sense that there’s something different that ties them together.” She shrugs. “I guess that was true of Sam and me.”

Freddie is very quiet at that. The silence stretches. Carly had been expecting him to laugh about it, or at least pontificate about some kind of scientific explanation. But instead, after a long moment of silence, Freddie finally says, “I guess maybe I should take a shower.”

They don’t talk much for the rest of the evening. Carly turns on the TV for some background noise while they take turns showering and getting ready for bed. They turn in a little early, still not saying much, except to exchange goodnights as Freddie settles down onto the couch, and Carly turns off the TV and gets into her bed.

The next day is a casual day; she and Freddie head over to Sam and Cat’s apartment to watch movies and veg out. It’s nice, Carly thinks. It’s exactly the kind of thing they all used to do all the time. The kind of thing that felt too fraught to Sam for so long that being able to enjoy this sheer normalcy has been out of reach. But now, Carly is here, they’re all hanging out, and it feels...almost exactly the way it used to. She and Sam have been playing at not being awkward for long enough with Freddie around that it just...doesn’t feel awkward anymore. Not even Cat’s presence seems to impact anything; she’s friendly and solicitous to both Carly and Freddie, and Carly doesn’t feel a trace of negativity or resentment from her, not even when she and Sam share a private joke, which has been happening more and more over the past few days.

It’s impossible to dislike Cat. Not that Carly *wants* to dislike her; Carly doesn’t particularly enjoy disliking anyone, except for a select few people who have especially earned it. Are there moments when it hurts a little to be reminded that Sam is devoted to Cat and not to her? Sure. But Carly’s jealousy and wistfulness can’t curdle into resentment of someone who has been nothing but kind to her.

Maybe Freddie feels similarly. Not that Carly thinks he has as much of a reason to be hurt at Sam and Cat’s relationship, but overall, Carly is impressed by how little his interactions with all of them have changed. After all, they are all still themselves, and the dynamic they built so long ago still remains.

That must also be on Freddie’s mind because over their early dinner, he asks them whether they want to talk over *iCarly* possibilities.

Sam frowns at him. “Nah, not now. Besides, you haven’t even decided if you’re coming back yet.”

“Oh, I’m coming back,” Freddie assures them.

Carly smiles at him, actually happy to hear this, if only because his presence smooths things over. “You are?”

“Well, of course. I have to drive you back home, don’t I?”

“Oh, not necessarily. I can get a flight from Seattle, or even from near your school.”

Freddie waves a hand, “No, we both know the prices are insane right now. Besides, no one I know from school is coming back until after the new year, so I’d much rather spend my free time with you guys than alone.”

“What if we’d much rather spend our free time alone than with you?” Sam asks sourly.

“*Sam*,” Cat and Carly admonish her simultaneously, then grin at each other. This is another thing that has been happening more.

“I don’t mean that,” Sam grumbles unconvincingly.

“I know you don’t,” Freddie replies in amusement. “Okay, we don’t have to talk about it now, but when I come back, I’d really like to figure something out if you two are game.”

“We can talk about it,” Carly offers, exchanging an uncertain glance with Sam, who mostly avoids her eyes.

She and Freddie don’t stay late, and head back to her apartment to turn in early. Freddie is quiet tonight, too. Carly wonders if he’s struggling a little more with the revelations about his friends than he’s letting on.

But they wake up early the next morning to get on the road, and Freddie quickly begins to feel like his old self. They stop for breakfast and coffee, and Freddie starts them out on the drive. They listen to music, they talk, they laugh, and Carly feels so grateful that Freddie decided to come back into their lives, because she’d forgotten how much she’d missed him.

Maybe if Sam is never ready to be best friends again, Carly will at least have a genuine close friendship with Freddie.

The drive to Seattle is very long, but they take turns resting and keeping each other awake. By the final stretch through Washington, they’re switching off every twenty minutes or so, as even just the act of stopping the car and standing up helps them stay awake. Carly doesn’t know how Spencer ever did this on his own, but she supposed they were probably rowdy enough passengers to help him stay awake.

When they finally park at their apartment, they start tiredly carrying their bags inside, prepared to quietly make their way into their respective apartments so they won’t wake up their families; it’s very early in the morning on Christmas Eve.

But as soon as they round the corner in the hallway between their apartments, the door to Freddie’s apartment bursts open, and his mother practically smothers him in a hug, already talking a mile a minute.

“Oh, you need a *bath*. I can’t imagine how you’ve kept care of yourself. Have you been putting the lotion on your back? With the special lotion sponge I made for you? We have *got* to get that good conditioner in your hair, it’s like *straw*.”

“*Mom*,” Freddie hisses sharply, trying to pull away as she pokes and prods at him, and casting a pleading look at Carly.

But Carly has no intention of getting in the middle of this, and backs away slowly, but Mrs. Benson notices her.

“Oh. Hello Carly,” she says coldly.

“Hi, Mrs. Benson.”

And, perhaps attracted by all the noise in the hallway, the door to her own apartment bursts open and Spencer hollers, “*Carly!*” with absolutely no regard to the noise level.

“*Shhh*,” they all three shush him, but he grabs Carly in a bear hug and tells her how happy he is to see her, though at least this time he’s managed to halve the volume.

“I’m glad to see you, too. Let’s get inside?” Carly suggests. She looks over her shoulder at Freddie, whose mother appears to be checking his scalp for lice. “See you tomorrow,” she tells him.

“Let’s hope so,” Freddie grumbles.

Once inside, Carly breathes in the immensely comforting and familiar scent of *home*. It’s changed only a little, mostly just Spencer’s scent, like warm bread, dominating the space. She shakes her head toward the door to the hallway, “She’s...a piece of work,” she assesses.

“Yeah, nothing’s changed there,” Spencer agrees. He’s smiling at her. Carly thinks he might actually have tears in his eyes.

Without a word, Carly flings herself at him in a hug, this one much more mutual than the bear hug he’d trapped her in before. “I missed you so much,” Carly tells him.

“Me, too, kiddo,” he replies. He pulls back after a moment. “It’s late. And you’re exhausted. As much as I want to hear *everything* you’ve been up to, I can wait until the morning.”

Carly’s grateful, because she *is* exhausted. Like, dead on her feet exhausted. “Thanks, Spencer.”

“Your room is ready for you.”

Carly heads up the stairs eagerly, propelled by her excitement to lie down and rest. She steps into her bedroom.

It’s weird. It looks the same as the last time she saw it, but yet, it no longer feels like her bedroom. It’s simultaneously familiar and alien to her, like a remnant of another girl’s life, laid out in front of her.

“I changed your sheets,” Spencer tells her proudly.

Carly wonders whether the same sheets had been on her bed for over a year before Spencer changed them. “Thank you,” she tells him again. Looking at the bed, she can see evidence that he did as he claims; the comforter is a bit off-kilter. Spencer always does his best, but sometimes, details like this elude him.

Spencer lingers in the doorway for a moment, before he sighs, “I’m just so glad you’re home.” He looks like a puppy wagging his tail as he beams at her, then finally says loudly, “Okay, good night *for real!*”

“Get some sleep!” she calls after him.

She looks around the bedroom again, putting her bags down on the old loveseat Sam used to sleep on. Or...she pauses, wondering. Had Sam slept on this one, or only the loveseat that burned up in the fire when Carly turned sixteen? It was difficult to remember the details of their history sometimes, because of all the secrecy, and all of Carly’s internal wrestling with herself, her attempts to understand her own feelings.

But it occurs to her that maybe part of the reason this room doesn’t feel like home isn’t only because she hasn’t lived in it in over a year, but also because she’s not the one who put together this room. Her friends and Spencer decorated this room for her, as a gift. And while she appreciates it and loves it...Carly is an adult now, and she’s learning what she likes and what she wants in life. Back then, she hadn’t even been willing to admit how much she wanted Sam. But now she is fully cognisant of it.

Maybe that’s part of why Carly hasn’t done much decorating in her apartment. Maybe there’s still a lot to learn about herself first.

She ruminates on this sleepily as she brushes her teeth and then gets into her bed. It’s comfortable, the sheets are cool and soft, and it feels almost like slipping on a glove with the way she seems to settle onto the mattress.

It’s only when she wakes up in the late morning, momentarily confused by her surroundings, that the odd lumps in the mattress feel unfamiliar, and she’s forced to confront the fact that Seattle isn’t her home, anymore.

But the truth is, she isn’t sure Los Angeles is, either.

Christmas Eve is fun. It’s mostly just her and Spencer, though Freddie pops in whenever he’s able to get away from his mom for a bit. Spencer had created a Christmas “tree” sculpture made of a bunch of makeup brushes of different sorts arranged to look like an evergreen tree, so the two of them hang decorations on it (and Spencer reattaches the pieces that fall off as they handle the sculpture).

And through it all, they talk, more than they have in a long time. Spencer has always occupied such a nebulous place in Carly’s life, both a parental figure and a sibling, both on her level and elevated. They took care of each other in many ways, but Carly had always looked up to Spencer, admired his creativity, his enthusiasm for life and art, his support of her

and her friends. Especially once she and Sam started changing, and Spencer made it part of his responsibility to allow them the time and space to explore their wolf selves, with him there as a protector and facilitator of the experience.

Early in the day, as they're decorating their unique Christmas tree, Freddie gets called back over to his mother's apartment and leaves with a groan, leaving Carly and Spencer alone and free to talk. Spencer brings up the very thing Carly has been ruminating on.

"So, I never did find a way to contact any werewolves in Los Angeles," he says casually, "But I can send you back with a hefty supply of wolfsbane."

"Oh! Didn't I tell you? I found the werewolves."

"You—you found them? Oh, hey, that's great!" Spencer enthuses.

"Yeah! You remember that time we drove down to LA because I found out my boyfriend Steven was cheating on me with a girl there?"

"Boy, do I ever. Moni was *not* happy to see me."

"Well, you *did* hit her with your car."

"*Years* ago!" Spencer defends himself.

"Still, that seems pretty hard to forget."

"Yeah, yeah," Spencer waves it off. "Okay, so what does this have to do with the werewolves?"

"Well, remember the girl he was cheating on me with? Tori?" Spencer nods slowly. "Well, she and I are at the same college, and had some classes together, so we hit it off again right away, and it turns out...she's a werewolf, too."

"No kidding?" Spencer sounds awed. "So she was able to help you and Sam, then?"

"Well, she already knew Sam. Sam's, uh, roommate is one of her best friends from high school, and she'd already shown Sam the ropes."

"But, wait, then why didn't Sam show you?" Spencer asks.

Sometimes, all of the lies Carly has been maintaining catch up with her. Maybe she didn't get quite enough sleep last night to think clearly. But she's at least quick enough to come up with a cover. "Oh, well. She kept meaning to. We were just both so busy. I barely saw her the first couple of months I was there because we were both getting used to school and everything, so honestly I spent more time with Tori. And once we put together that we knew the same Tori...I was in with the werewolves."

"Gotcha." Spencer nods, seeming to accept this.



There's a flicker of something, though, at the edge of Carly's awareness, that makes her senses prickly slightly. Spencer can be so difficult to read sometimes, Carly wonders just how aware he might be that she and Sam aren't as close as they used to be, and why. She doesn't know why she doesn't just tell him. She doesn't have to go into their romantic history to explain it.

But when he says, "I'm really happy you got it all figured out," there's a heaviness to his tone, and Carly begins to put together what really might be going on here.

"Hey," she says quietly. "I appreciate all you did for me. You were *great*, the way you took care of me and helped me learn how to be a werewolf."

Spencer shrugs, but his lip is lifting slightly in a smile. "It's what Dad did for me," he discloses. "So I just did the same for you."

"And that was exactly what I needed as a teenager. But I'm an adult now." Carly almost laughs, because she doesn't feel like much of one. "And that means I need to start finding my own way. And I did."

"And I'm so proud of you," Spencer replies.

It's profoundly impactful, to hear something like that from someone who has served so many familial roles in Carly's life. "But even though I'm growing up, I'll always need you," she tells him.

Spencer looks moved, but after a moment, he scoffs, "Nah, you won't. You lived abroad, and now you're living on your own, and...you've got this. I know you do. I'm just happy I helped you along the way."

"You really did," Carly emphasizes, but she keeps thinking about what Spencer said, about their father. "So, Dad really helped you with werewolf stuff, the way you helped me?" she asks.

Spencer nods. "Yeah. Always took wolfsbane around me, while I had the freedom to run and explore. It was really great, but, I didn't have a Sam, so it could be a little lonely sometimes, too. But Dad always stressed the importance of being safe. Having a human around who is capable of speech can be so important. Especially one in the military, because people respect him automatically. I mean, I couldn't give that to you, but I did my best."

"People like you right away," Carly tells him. "That's similarly powerful."

"I guess."

"What about now?" Carly asks.

Spencer tilts his head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, now that you don't have to look after me...do you get out there?"

Spencer shakes his head. "Oh, no. I don't."

“Really? Why not?”

“It doesn’t seem safe.”

“It’s fine,” Carly assures him. “Me, Sam and Tori go out together sometimes, and we all change. As long as it’s away from people and you have places to hide, you’re fine. Tori says she used to do it alone.”

Spencer looks alarmed. “You all go out?”

“Of course!” Carly doesn’t want to belittle Spencer’s concerns, but she has never felt unsafe while out as a werewolf. Even when Spencer used to watch over her and Sam, there had never been any incidents in which they were in danger.

But Spencer just smiles and shakes his head. “I guess when you raise someone and let them out into the world, you just have to let go of the things they do that scare you.”

It’s awfully mature, coming from Spencer. It’s also hard to rationalize his fear, and Carly wants to push back, to convince him that there’s nothing to be afraid of, but she doesn’t. Instead, she assures him that they’re alright, that they have each other, and that she’s grateful for all he did for her.

Freddie comes back over before too long, making all talk of lycanthropy impossible, but Carly is still thinking about Spencer and his wolfsbane and his fear. What is it about this that makes Spencer too afraid to venture out on his own?

Spencer isn’t a very fearful person by definition. Often, Carly thinks of him as one of the bravest people she knows. He’s always been unapologetically himself, always been set on pursuing his art even when it seems impossible, frivolous, silly. Also, his uncanny relationship with fire has necessitated his own courage. Spencer, in general, isn’t someone who lets concern about other people hold him back from what he wants to do.

Which makes Carly consider that maybe Spencer doesn’t *want* to change into a werewolf.

But that’s difficult to imagine. Carly *loves* changing. When she doesn’t get to do it for a while, it takes a toll on her, emotionally, physically. It makes her body tense up, it makes her emotions feel out of control. She can’t imagine that as a condition that people would thrive under, would want to choose.

She thinks again, about Spencer describing how their father was the same way, watching over Spencer as he changed. Maybe it has to do with the fact that it was lonely for him, to change alone. Maybe there was something about their father’s approach that it made it particularly frightening to be a werewolf, alone. Carly knows her father is cautious and protective. Maybe he imprinted some of that onto Spencer, made Spencer overly cautious about this one specific thing.

Or, maybe it’s as simple as, this is something Spencer shared with their father, a treasured memory he can’t experience again. Carly knows there are so few things Spencer and their father found common ground on; they were *so different*, they often felt off-kilter and

confused around one another. Carly had a sense from the time she was quite young that she was her father's favorite, something that made her feel guilty to even consider. Maybe Spencer doesn't want to change by himself because it makes him miss their father and the one point of connection they ever had.

But still. Carly wants to provide Spencer with the freedom to experience his wolf self. For all the roles Spencer has played in her life—parental, sibling, guardian, friend, confidant, protector—Carly wants to be able to give some of that back to her older brother, now that she's older herself. And while she may not be their father, Carly likes to think that in some ways, she helped Spencer grow up just as much as he helped her.

Carly makes it a goal that, the next time she comes back to Seattle, it will be over the full moon, so that she can offer Spencer the gift of her protection as he changes in the forest.

Even if he doesn't know about it, and she can't give it to him now, it's the best Christmas gift she can think of.

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Christmas is mostly quiet. Almost boringly so, but Sam isn't complaining. Cat doesn't ask Sam to attend church with her, because Cat doesn't go, either. Instead, they enjoy a quiet Christmas Eve together, just the two of them. Which means sex. And maybe Cat is pouring some of that churchy mysticism into their intimacy, because to Sam, it feels *magical*.

Yeah, Sam isn't exactly disappointed that Freddie and Carly aren't in town right now. Having some breathing room from that whole situation is a relief.

Christmas Day is a little bit more exciting. Nona comes over to cook a huge celebratory meal, Dice and Goomer come by to exchange presents. It's good to see them; they've been so busy with college and everything else that they haven't seen as much of Dice and Goomer this year, but their friends fill them in on what they've been up to. Goomer has been performing well in his fights, meaning he's been traveling for more of them, which has kept Dice busy, too, on top of school and his other lucrative endeavors. It's no wonder they've all been a bit out of touch.

But by the evening, the apartment is just theirs again, and Sam snuggles with Cat on the couch as Cat selects yet another Christmas movie to watch. Although catching up with friends has been a major part of this break, and a welcome one at that, Sam is appreciating these past few days, when she and Cat just get to be together, with nothing to do and nowhere to go.

Maybe that's just because Sam really doesn't like to do stuff a lot of the time.

As they watch Macaulay Culkin revel in the newfound freedom of being left at home alone, Sam's phone buzzes.

It's Carly.

**Merry Christmas**

Sam debates replying. It's such a simple sentiment, but a part of her wants to hold Carly at arm's length, especially when her arm is, quite literally, around Cat.

But before she decides whether or not to reply in kind, another text appears.

**Freddie and I are going to drive back tomorrow**

**He's ready to get away from his mom**

**Spencer is going out of town, too**

**And we saw Gibby for like two seconds today**

**He says hi, by the way**

It's silly for Carly to send that when Gibby can always just text Sam himself. But it prompts her to reply.

**Hi to Gibby I guess**

**So we'll see you Friday**

**We might still be pretty tired from the drive, though**

**Don't worry, we'll just hang out**

**See you then**

Sam pauses, feeling oddly awkward about the text she's about to send.

**And Merry Christmas**

Once it's sent, it feels less daunting. Carly doesn't reply.

"Is that Carly?" Cat asks. Sam has made no attempt to hide her phone as she texts, and while Cat hasn't exactly been looking over her shoulder, she's glanced over a few times.

"Yeah. They're driving back tomorrow so we'll see them in a couple days."

"Oh, yay!" Cat enthuses. "We'll have to have another party."

"We will," Sam promises, setting aside her phone and tugging Cat a little closer. "But for now, I just want to enjoy my time with you."

"I thought that's what we were doing," Cat frowns.

Sam grins, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "It is."

Carly is right that she and Freddie are still a little wiped out from their road trip on Friday, so they just come over in the afternoon to hang out and watch movies and things. But apparently, Freddie isn't too wiped out to discuss *iCarly*.

"So, I was thinking," he begins. "Maybe we *don't* have to change much to make *iCarly* palatable to an older audience. Our audience wasn't *just* kids. I think keeping our content appropriate for all viewers is the right move."

"Well, I wasn't about to suggest an episode about how to roll a joint," Sam grunts. "But like, aren't we going to look ridiculous Random Dancing now that we're grown ass people and not just kids having fun together?"

"I'm not saying we have to keep everything," Freddie argues. "I'm just saying, we don't have to try to fill a niche. We can just make weird sketches like we used to. People seemed to like that our content was formulaic, but just weird enough to be unexpected."

Sam glances over at Carly for help. Carly looks thoughtful, but then shakes her head. "I don't even know if we have enough time to put something together."

Freddie frowns. "You said we could try to do this when we got back from Seattle," he replies, clearly disappointed.

"No, I know," Carly backtracks. "And we can try! I just don't want to make any promises. We're all out of practice."

Freddie shrugs. "I don't have to go back right after the new year. School doesn't start up for another couple of weeks, I just don't want to overstay my welcome."

"Staying late would certainly do that," Sam groans.

"Okay, so," Carly starts, glancing at Sam apologetically. "Would we want to revisit some of our classic sketches? Or make all new ones?"

Sam prickles. She thought that she and Carly had agreed that they didn't want to do this, but Carly seems inclined to at least humor Freddie. Sam decides to shut this down. "Okay, but I can't think about this kind of thing with an empty stomach."

"Oh, maybe I can make something," Cat suggests, getting up from the couch and heading into the kitchenette. Sam watches her rummage around, half-listening as Carly and Freddie discuss whether replacing George the Bra with a different bra would affect the integrity of the sketch. But Sam can really only focus on what delicious thing Cat might make. Except, Cat's rummaging seems random, and she's not taking out any food. Instead, she comes back over to the trio. "I forgot," she announces. "I need to go to the store and was waiting for the holiday to be over!" Sam frowns, because they had gone to the store just before Christmas Eve, and they usually go every couple of weeks now that they have a car. Cat hadn't indicated they were out of anything, either. But before Sam can say anything, Cat suggests, "Why don't we order some food?"

"Sure," Sam agrees, then suggests, "Pizza?" because it's a natural choice for a hangout.

But Cat crinkles her nose uncertainly. "Hmm, I was actually thinking Tubba Chicken," she suggests.

"You were?" Sam is a little surprised. She's usually the one to suggest fried chicken.

"I'm in the mood for a spicy breast," Cat admits.

"Huh, okay." She looks over at Freddie and Carly, who nod, seeming interested. "Only one problem. They don't deliver."

"Don't ask me to drive," Freddie says right away, since he and Carly took his car over. "That road trip took a lot out of me." Carly nods in agreement.

"I'll go," Sam offers. Sure, she doesn't like doing things most of the time, but she's almost always willing to put in some effort for some fried chicken.

"Why don't you take Carly with you?" Cat suggests.

"Oh, um, she doesn't have to—"

"Sure she does!" Cat interrupts. "Because she can hold the chicken! Otherwise you might have to brake hard or take a sharp turn and you'll spill chicken all over the car! And while *you* might eat chicken that's been on the floor of Nona's car, I don't think the rest of us would."

"I don't even know Nona, but I'm not eating off her floor," Carly affirms. She stands up. "I'll come with you."

"Okay, what's everyone want?" Sam asks. As Cat and Freddie rattle off their orders, Sam notices Carly making note of it in her phone, which hadn't even occurred to Sam, who was going to try to rely on her memory and probably would have had to text Freddie when she got there to remind her of his order. Good old Carly, always thinking ahead.

Once Freddie has given her some cash to cover his order, she and Carly head out through the front door and down the apartment walkway toward the little parking lot. They're both quiet, until they get to the car itself. Sam unlocks the door and Carly slides into the passenger's seat next to her.

The first thing she says is, "So, who is Nona?"

"Oh. That's Cat's grandmother. We're borrowing this car from her, long term."

"Ohh, Nona like *nonna*?" There's a slight difference in Carly's inflection of the word, so that Sam understands what she means.

"So you did pick up some Italian over there," she observes.

"Just a bit. Like I could maybe hold a conversation with a second grader, as long as they weren't too smart."

"Eh, that's probably about the same as talking to my mom's boyfriends, so we're probably pretty even."

Carly laughs, and they fall quiet again for a moment. Sam drums her fingers on the steering wheel awkwardly as they sit at a red light. She wonders why Cat sent Carly along with her. Why didn't Cat just come along instead? Maybe she thinks it's weird to just leave guests alone at your house, though. That sounds like Cat. And Carly is a better choice to send with Sam than Freddie. Even though both choices are awkward these days.

Finally, in a tone that suggests she's been thinking about how to say this, Carly says, "I don't know how we're going to talk Freddie out of this *iCarly* thing."

Sam sighs. "Yeah, I know. He's really gung-ho about it."

"I mean, I get it. It's like, recapturing something that was really important and foundational for all of us."

"Problem is, I don't think he realizes that what made that happen *can't* be captured again."

"Yeah," Carly says begrudgingly.

"Which sucks," Sam admits. "Because honestly, I get how Freddie feels. Wanting to be a part of something like that again."

Sam can feel Carly looking at her but keeps her eyes on the road. "You mean," Carly says slowly, "You miss it?"

"Well, yeah, of course," Sam scoffs. "It was fun!"

"You only say that because you skipped the prep work half the time," Carly cracks.

"I did not!" Sam argues, but then considers the accusation. "Okay, maybe a quarter of the time," she concedes.

“I’m a little surprised,” Carly tells her. “I assumed you had no interest in doing the webshow anymore.”

“I mean, I didn’t think I did either. Not with the way things have been between us, not with the weirdness of having to come out to Freddie hanging over my head.”

“I came out to Freddie, too, by the way,” Carly puts in.

“You—wait, you did? What did he say?”

“He was a little surprised. He thought I was telling him I was gay at first, and *that* was a shock to him, but bi seemed to make a little more sense to him. We didn’t talk about it that much, but he was fine about it.”

“Huh.” Sam takes that in. “You know, he’s been pretty cool about all this.”

“I know,” Carly agrees. “But it’s not a surprise. Freddie has always been a good guy.”

Sam grunts noncommittally. “Guess at least maybe all of this will be, like, a final nail in the coffin to him having any feelings for either of us.”

“Unless me being bi sat better with him because at least I’m still into guys.” Sam frowns, but Carly shrugs. “We can’t control how he feels, anyway. But, from spending this time with him...I kinda think he’s over me.”

“Good.”

“Good?” Carly asks, though she’s smiling a little, as if she’s already waiting for the joke.

“Yeah. He’s already enough of a loser *without* the unrequited crush.”

Carly shakes her head, but she can’t help but chuckle.

Sam doesn’t want to dwell on Freddie’s feelings, though, so she takes them back to the subject she keeps considering. “Would *you* want to do the webshow again? You know, in theory?”

“Hypothetically?” Carly pauses, but then her tone gets quieter. “I guess I feel the way you do. I *want* to. I just don’t know if it’s possible anymore, when we’re so...like this.” She gestures between them. “*We* aren’t fun anymore.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees heavily. She pulls into Tubba Chicken and parks next to the restaurant. She stares at the big window poster featuring the twelve-piece family meal, her go-to order. She doesn’t shift her gaze as she says, heart speeding up slightly, “I dunno, though. This past week or so when we’ve been hanging out, it hasn’t been *unfun*.”

She can feel Carly’s eyes on her, taking her in. “That’s true,” she agrees.

“Even if some of it’s for show, to seem normal, if we can do it for our friends who know us best, why can’t we put on a show for our viewers?” Sam asks.



“You really *do* want to do this,” Carly breathes.

“I dunno. I guess I do. It would keep Freddie off our backs, and besides, if we have something to work on until he leaves town, maybe things will be...easier.”

Even as Sam suggests all this, a part of her thinks this might be a bad idea. Both the idea of revisiting *iCarly* and all the feelings that brings up in her, all the memories of that previous time in her life. Not to mention, the fact that it would necessarily bring her closer to Carly.

But she and Carly have been close while Freddie has been in town. Not like they were, but... being close is natural to them. She thinks about how on this drive, they’ve managed to make each other laugh, despite everything that hangs between them.

And she thinks about Cat’s confession that she always liked the show and would like to see it come back. And suddenly, Cat’s suggestion to give Sam and Carly a minute alone to talk seems diabolical.

She thinks about how much Cat clearly likes Carly, how she’s been hopeful that Sam and Carly can rekindle a friendship. Well, whatever, even if Cat has somehow masterminded this little conversation, this invitation for Sam and Carly to be closer again, Sam can’t be upset about it. Not when it’s what she wants to do, anyway.

Because as clever as Cat is, Sam is absolutely still someone who does what she wants. It’s just that sometimes she wants things that make Cat happy.

But for now, she and Carly head into the fried chicken joint to order everyone’s meals. They wait together, idly checking their phones. There’s not much to chat about in a place so public. Sam notices the young woman behind the counter staring at them. She must be a new employee, Sam hasn’t seen her before, and she’s pretty familiar with the staff at Tubba Chicken. It makes her shift to hide Carly from sight, turning her back toward the girl. This happened a few times when they were doing touristy things together around the city with Freddie, but at least most people in this city know to be discreet, and to try not to bother celebrities just living their lives. Not always, though, and Sam isn’t all that keen for her favorite fried chicken spot to become too awkward to visit, so she keeps a low profile as best she can when neither of them are wearing so much as a hat, or sunglasses, or a hoodie.

For her part, Carly seems oblivious. But Sam knows that’s likely just her way of deflecting attention. If she looks like she has no idea she might be someone you recognize, it can make people second guess themselves. That’s a skill Sam has never mastered. Blending in has never been her strong suit, she’s always been too loud, too conspicuous, too energetic.

Luckily their food is fast—it *is* fast food—and they’re back in the car before the girl behind the counter seems to summon up the courage to speak to them. But as they begin the drive back, Carly continues the conversation they’ve been having. “So, okay. Even if we’re both willing to do *iCarly* again, I still can’t figure out what we should *actually* even produce right now.”

“I think Freddie might be onto something with the classic sketches,” Sam suggests.

“Especially if we’re only going to have time to get one episode in the bag, I guess it should

be crowd pleasers.”

“Yeah. I guess if I’d *really* believed we might go back to this, I’d have grabbed some of our props out of the attic while I was back in Seattle,” Carly laments. She shakes her head.

“Would you believe it’s still set up for the show? Though honestly, I think Spencer’s probably going to turn it into a sculpture space before much longer. Now that it’s pretty clear I’m not heading back anytime soon.”

“Guess I can’t really blame him.”

“Me neither,” Carly agrees. “My room is still the same, too. It was kinda surreal.”

“All of this is kind of surreal, to be honest,” Sam admits. “The whole *idea* of bringing back the show we sort of accidentally created.” She shakes her head, remembering the whole incident—the detention that Carly was almost certainly serving because she’d taken the fall for something Sam had done, Freddie tagging along to record the talent auditions because he was obsessed with Carly, Freddie idiotically uploading the wrong files of them making fun of Miss Briggs. And then the ensuing fight with Miss Briggs about which students’ talents were appropriate for the talent show.

And all at once, the idea comes to Sam, making her grin. “What?” Carly asks, noticing right away. “What is it?”

“I just had an idea for what we can do for *iCarly*.”

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While Sam and Carly go get their meal, Cat shows Freddie how she makes chocolate chip cookies. It’s such an easy recipe, and one she knows so well, that they have cookies in the oven by the time Sam and Carly return, both looking excited as they bound into the apartment, bringing the heavy scent of fried food with them. Cat wrinkles her nose slightly. Sure, fried chicken is *good*, but she doesn’t want to eat it all the time. But it was a sure bet to get Sam and Carly to have a minute alone to chat.

And very quickly, Cat can see that her idea paid off.

“Freddie,” Carly announces, “Sam came up with a *great* idea for *iCarly*.”

Freddie perks up, stepping away from the stove and toward the dining nook where the two of them are putting down the food. “Oh! Great, tell me!”

“First, let’s eat,” Sam insists. “I won’t explain it right on an empty stomach.”

“It sounds like you explained it just fine to Carly,” Freddie grumbles.

“Carly gets me,” Sam says simply. She casts an apologetic look to Cat, who just smiles back. Sam doesn’t owe her an apology for knowing her best friend well.

They settle into the dining nook, and Sam immediately starts in on her twelve-piece meal. It’s far more food than anyone else has ordered, and Freddie watches her with a mix of

annoyance and distaste. “We’re not going to have to wait for you to finish *all* of that before we talk about your idea, are we?” he asks wearily.

Sam glares at him, sucking a chicken bone clean. “*Now* you are,” she answers hostilely.

“Come on, Sam,” Carly pleads. “It’s *such* a good idea, I can’t wait to talk about it.”

Sam seems to soften somewhat, and takes a few more bites, seeming to consider, before she waves a hand at Carly. “All right, go ahead.”

“Okay.” Carly sits up straighter, beaming at Freddie. “Remember how *iCarly* even started?”

Freddie’s brow crinkles. “Sure. When I uploaded the wrong part of those talent auditions and everyone thought you two were funny.”

“*Exactly*,” Carly replies significantly.

“Ohhh,” Freddie nods, then frowns. “Wait, it’s going to be hard to secretly record you if you’re in on it.”

“What?” Carly asks, sounding shocked.

“That’s what you’re asking for, right?” Freddie asks slowly. “That first video came about because you two were just being yourselves and I got it on film.”

“No!” Carly shakes her head, “That’s not it at all!”

“Oh.” Freddie looks flummoxed. “Then I don’t get it.”

Carly looks to Sam for help, who cleans a chicken bone with her mouth and wipes her hand on her pants. Cat passes her a napkin, shaking her head at the action. Sam can be such an animal sometimes. Even when the moon isn’t full.

Sam takes the napkin from Cat and wads it up in her fist to wipe off her fingers, then says. “We’re not talking about that time you filmed us like a creeper because you were obsessed with Carly,” she tells Freddie bluntly. His face goes a little hot, but Sam ignores it and continues. “We’re talking about that first episode, when we featured kids whose talents weren’t appreciated by Miss Briggs. We think we should bring back the talent show.”

“*Ohhh!*” Freddie sounds way more enthusiastic this time. “That’s great! Really takes us back to the beginning, back to our roots. But do we have time to seek out talent?”

“We don’t need to,” Sam explains, rolling her eyes. “Cat and her high school friends are a talented bunch, we’ll just ask them.”

“Me?” Cat asks, already flattered and excited to be featured on the return of *iCarly*. “You want *me* to be on your show?”

“Of course.” Sam smiles at her. “Only challenge will be figuring out which of your talents to feature. You have *so many*.”

Cat blushes and giggles, a nervous sound. She's not used to having her talents recognized so openly. Even at Hollywood Arts, where there was really no question that she had talent, it tended to be overshadowed by her odd behavior, behavior she really didn't know how to regulate until she got a little older, stopped living with her parents, and had countless counseling sessions with Lane. Oh, and the "special vitamins" help, too. Now, sure, she's still *weird*, but also more balanced. Back then, she might have been an incredible singer, but someone like Tori or Andre were perhaps favored simply because they were more reliable. She might have been a strong actress, but Beck or Jade were deemed students who took theater and film more seriously than she did, and were given priority. This is part of what's special about Cat's friendship with Jade, though. Even if Jade has never outright said it, Cat knows that Jade values her as an actress, and it's why she often puts Cat in her projects. It's nice that there is someone who has never considered her difficult to work with, or not a serious performer.

Freddie looks thoughtful and eager. "Oh, that's great! That can work. We'd better let them know right away! Are we sure everyone will have time to prepare before we film?"

Cat has an answer for this, at least. "Don't worry! We're all used to auditioning and things, we've been practicing our crafts for a long time. I'm sure we all have something we can just brush up for *iCarly*!"

Freddie nods, seeming satisfied by this. "Right, you guys are practically professionals!"

"That's what we've been training to be!" Cat agrees. The idea makes her even more excited as she muses aloud, "Maybe it will even help some of us get exposure! So we can get real gigs!" She's thinking mostly of Beck and Robbie, the ones who are out there hustling and not worrying about school at the moment. Getting work could be a great opportunity for any of them, but school is the primary focus for most of them right now.

"So, we can showcase our friends," Freddie assesses. Cat likes that he's already considering her friends his own friends. "What about us? Do we want to showcase anything?"

"What are you going to showcase, typing code?" Sam snarks at him.

"I don't know!" Freddie mutters defensively. "What are you going to do, debone chicken with your mouth?"

Sam glances at Carly, who looks intrigued. "That's actually not a bad talent," Carly admits. "You should do it!"

Sam smirks triumphantly. "I think I will."

"I'm not sure what I might do," Carly says thoughtfully.

Sam scoffs. "Oh, come on. You could sing, for sure."

"Yeah, but..." Carly glances at Cat. "I don't think I'll measure up."

"You'll be great!" Cat encourages. "I can help you!"

Carly's smile feels like sunshine. "I'll think about it," she says, in a playful tone that suggests she's already decided yes.

"Okay, well, great!" Freddie enthuses. "I guess we just need to get our performers onboard and a location!"

"I'll start letting everyone know!" Cat says excitedly.

"We can start figuring out what we want to say about our return," Carly suggests. "We won't know how to introduce the acts until we know more about what everyone is doing, but we can figure out how to introduce the show." Her eyes widen. "Maybe the cowboy and the idiot farmgirl can introduce the show!"

Sam laughs. "That might be fun, actually. We'll just have to find costumes that work."

Freddie begins talking about how they'll have to make it clear that, for now, they're just back with one episode, but that more might come in the future. Cat heads over to the little workspace across from the patio doors, the little bit of distance giving the three *iCarly* creators time to strategize and plan. For her part, Cat starts a group chat with her high school friends.

*Cat Valentine*

**Guys! Guess what?**

**iCarly is doing another episode**

**and they want us to showcase our talent!**

*Tori Vega*

**Omg that's awesome!!**

Cat grins, Tori's excitement feeding into her own.

*Robbie Shapiro*

**Wow!**

**Even me?**

Cat shakes her head at him.

*Cat Valentine*

**Of course you too!**

But the first response that makes her grin falter a little bit is Beck's.

*Beck Oliver*

**Is it paid?**

*Cat Valentine*

**Well, no**

**It's just for fun!**

*Beck Oliver*

**I see**

Cat doesn't know how to gauge his response. Beck can be difficult enough to read in person, let alone over text.

*Jade West*

**Do we have to?**

And, just as quickly, Cat's excitement plummets, and she's crestfallen. As she's typing her disappointed reply, Tori chastises Jade.

*Tori Vega*

**Jade, come on**

**It'll be fun!**

*Jade West*

**Yeah, I don't do "fun"**

*Cat Valentine*

**Look, nobody has to do it if they don't want to**

**I just thought it might be nice**

Cat is about to just put her phone down and walk away if everybody is going to be so negative, when Andre chimes in.

*Andre Harris*

**Showcasing our talent, you mean like**

**we get to pick what we do and perform it?**

*Cat Valentine*

**Yeah that's what I mean**

**It can be anything you want**

**It's supposed to be fun**

*Andre Harris*

**Cool, I'm in**

**Probably not gonna be often that I'll get**

**such creative control and such a big audience**

**this early in my career**

Cat nearly squeals with joy as Andre singlehandedly salvages her mood.

*Cat Valentine*

**Yes, exactly!!**

*Beck Oliver*

**Huh, that's a good point**

**I didn't think about that**

**Sorry, all the stuff I've been reading has been about**

**how if you want to be paid for your work,**

**you can't give it away for free**

**But I wasn't thinking about the other benefits**

*Cat Valentine*

**Does that mean you'll do it?**

*Beck Oliver*

**Sure thing**

*Robbie Shapiro*

**This sounds great but I have no idea what to do!**

*Beck Oliver*

**Come on, you've been working hard on your act**



Robbie Shapiro

**But it's not finished yet!**

Beck Oliver

**And you won't be doing a full set**

Cat is excited about one detail, though.

*Cat Valentine*

**Robbie, you've been working on new material?**

**That's so exciting!!**

**I can't wait to see!!**

*Beck Oliver*

**Think of it as a test run**

By the time Jade cuts back in, Cat is feeling excited enough again that not even Jade's typical negativity spoils her mood.

*Jade West*

**Maybe take Robbie's pep talk somewhere private**

**Nobody wants to see that**

Cat rolls her eyes, but she doesn't need to jump in.

*Beck Oliver*

**It's a relevant conversation**

**Maybe other people share Robbie's concerns**

*Jade West*

**Whatever**

**I don't think I can be involved**

**Isn't iCarly for kids?**

**My work isn't exactly kid stuff**

*Cat Valentine*

**It's meant for all ages**

**But I bet a lot of the audience aged up with the show**

*Jade West*

**Yeah, I dunno if I can do "all ages"**

*Tori Vega*

**That just means no gore, nudity, or language**

**Plenty of your work is creepy as hell without those things**

*Cat Valentine*

**Most of your work is "all ages"**

**Kids tell ghost stories, you know**

*Jade West*

**Yeah, I don't tell "ghost stories"**

**I make art about existential, psychological torment**

*Tori Vega*

**Jade, why don't we take this to our own texts**

**Because I have several ideas for what you could present**

Jade West

**Fine**

**Unlike some people**

**We know when to be private**

Cat has a feeling that Tori can easily talk Jade into this. Tori can talk Jade into *anything*, as far as Cat has seen.

*Beck Oliver*

**It doesn't count if you announce it**

To Cat's surprise, it's Tori who answers.

*Tori Vega*

**Oh, shut up**

*Beck Oliver*

**Wow**

**Jade is rubbing off on you**

Andre Harris

**Not a mental image I needed**

*Beck Oliver*

**Hey, I didn't take it there, you did**

Robbie Shapiro

**Maybe we should stop referencing our friends' sex life**

Cat expects Jade to come back in with some kind of snarky reply, but all she says a minute or so later is:

*Jade West*

**Fine, I'm in**

*Cat Valentine*

**Yay!!!**

**We're probably going to film in the next couple days**

**We just need to find a location**

*Jade West*

**Good thing we all worked with Sikowitz**

**He taught us to make a few days seems like weeks of work**

*Beck Oliver*

**Why don't we film at my trailer?**

**It's private, we won't have to worry about parents  
or siblings showing up while we perform**

Andre Harris

**Or grandmothers who have lost their minds**

Tori Vega

**I know by "siblings" you mean Trina**

**And I support this idea**

*Cat Valentine*

**That would be great!!**

**I'll let them know we have a location**

Cat practically skips over to where the other three are sitting and chatting. Sam looks up, eyes already softening at the sight of her, and Carly and Freddie soon follow her lead. Cat grins triumphantly at them. "Everyone is on board and Beck says we can film at his trailer!"

"Ooh," Carly utters with interest. "That's a good location."

Sam nods her agreement. "Might be a little tight, but I think we can make it work. And he has stuff that will make for an interesting background."

"I'll take your word for it," Freddie replies.

"Now, I just have to figure out what I'm going to do!" Cat realizes, abruptly feeling overwhelmed with possibility.

"Whatever it is, I can't wait," Sam smirks at her.

-

A few days later, they're at Beck's trailer, filming *iCarly*.

And honestly?

Sam is having a blast.

She'd been nervous about it, for the first time in a long time. Back in Seattle, the idea of performing live in front of a camera felt almost inconsequential, even though the impact of it was large enough to turn them into a kind of celebrity. A lot of the time, no matter how much they prepared and rehearsed, it often just felt like playing around with her best friend, and the camera, representing thousands of viewers, just *happened* to be there.

The idea of doing this for the first time in over a year, a very consequential year in which critical changes happened for all of them, not to mention with a new location...all of these details put Sam on edge a little bit. And that's before she even considers the fact that her connection to Carly is so different now. Even with the work they put into each episode, so much of it was about being able to read each other, play off of each other. Carly's assessment, that maybe this might not work because they aren't the same, resonates with Sam.

They'd even briefly discussed the idea of not doing the show live, since they all feel so out of practice, and because Freddie's video editing skills are refined enough that he might be able to do some particularly great work with enough time to pore through footage from his main camera and his master shot camera. And because it would be a little less pressure for their guest performers. But Cat assured them that all their performers are prepared and not afraid of live performance, and they decided that, for now, it makes sense to stick with their roots.

And the second they're standing in Beck's trailer, and Freddie points the camera at them and begins to count down, a surge of energy fills Sam, and it's as though she can almost *feel* a switch in her mind being flipped on. Within seconds, she's Sam from *iCarly*, next to her best friend, who announces, "I'm Carly!"

"And I'm Sam!"

And in unison, they call, "And this is *iCarly*!"

"It's been a while since we've seen you all," Carly begins, and the two of them trade off loosely-scripted dialogue in which they briefly explain where they've been (here Freddie also turns the camera to himself to give a brief snippet of detail of his own life), why they've gotten back together, and the fact that this might be the only show for a while. As Carly expresses appreciation for their fans, and Freddie zooms in for a shot of Carly on her own, Sam ducks away to quickly pull on a cowboy vest and cowboy hat that they picked up at a thrift store the other day, and to paste on a moustache that Tori happens to own. "And without further ado," Carly says, which is Sam's cue.

Sam steps back over to her mark, and Freddie focuses on her. "We'd like to present tonight's episode of *iCarly*," Sam drawls in her cowboy voice. "Now, some of you out there, maybe you've been watching since day one," Sam continues. It's good that this cowboy voice forces her to take her time with her dialogue, because just off-camera, Carly is quickly changing her own clothes. The main difference is, her outfit change requires changing her shirt. So Sam is attempting to give her plenty of time to do that. "And you might remember that from day one we've been all about showcasing talent." She strokes her moustache. "Now you might think growing a moustache that looks this good takes some talent, and you'd be right about that. But if this impresses you, I think you'll really like what we're about to show you."

And right on cue, Carly sidles up to her, giggling and playfully stroking the end of her moustache. “Excuse me, mister, but you have a squirrel on your face,” she lilts.

“No, ma’am,” Sam replies seriously. “This here is my moustache.”

Carly erupts into more giggles. “Is that the squirrel’s name?”

“It’s not a squirrel!” Sam insists. “It’s a *moustache*.”

The way Carly is giggling and pressing up close to her is almost enough to make Sam lose her focus. Maybe there’s a reason this has always been their favorite sketch. It’s a better excuse than most for them to be close and flirtatious but still be able to laugh it off.

“Well, anyway,” Sam eventually says after a bit more banter about the moustache. “Our first performer tonight may be clean-shaven, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t worth taking a gander at. Beck Oliver will be performing a piece called *Half of Me*.”

And with that, Freddie shifts his camera over to Beck, who stands stoically, expression serious. He’s a dramatic performer, that much Sam knows, and he’s *good*, which also isn’t a surprise. It’s a good choice for a monologue—not too long, but gives him a chance to display a variety of emotions as he performs his piece about being an all-American (yet also all-Canadian) child of an immigrant family.

But because of the tone of their show, they can only let it stay so somber for so long. After his performance, Sam and Carly applaud for him, and then Sam sidles up to him, shaking her head. “Shame about your face,” she drawls.

Beck frowns. “What are you talking about?”

“Your naked lip sure is an eyesore.”

“Oh!” Beck turns away for a second and when he turns back, he’s wearing an ostentatious fake moustache. “Is this better?” he asks.

“Well, I’ll be, that’s some mighty fine growth you’ve got there.”

“I have my ways,” Beck says placidly, then turns to face Freddie’s camera. “And you can, too,” he says conspiratorially, then opens up his blazer to show a row of mustaches and begins launching into an infomercial-esque sales pitch about *InstaStaches*.

It’s corny, it’s cheesy, and it’s very *iCarly*. It’s not very Beck, but he’s game to do it, and it does show that he has a broader range than just drama. He can be comedic, too, even if he’s pretty clearly more comfortable with dramatic acting.

At the same time, though, he seems relieved when the silly sales pitch is over. The camera shifts back to Carly and Sam. Carly is wide-eyed, staring at Sam. “That man was selling squirrels.” Sam rolls her eyes, but Carly asks, “Is that where your squirrel came from?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that,” Sam drawls. “Just like I can neither confirm nor deny just how swell a moustache would look on our next couple of guests. Presenting: Robbie

Shapiro and Rex Powers.”

She and Carly step aside as Freddie points the camera at Robbie, who grins shyly and waves. “Hi, I’m Robbie.”

“And I’m Rex,” says his puppet.

Except...it’s not the voice Rex normally uses. It’s a high-pitched voice, much like a typical ventriloquist’s dummy voice. It’s still a little strange to watch, because Sam has interacted enough with Rex to be used to his rougher persona.

But she can’t pay extremely close attention, because she and Carly are changing clothes, into a taco costume and a spaghetti costume (that Andre happens to own for some reason). It’s a little tribute to Spencer, who can’t be here (and is also the best they could do because they couldn’t convince a single one of their guests to do Baby Spencer, which Sam thinks is ultimately for the best, because she didn’t want to get stuck building that special crib with so little time to prepare).

Robbie’s act starts out...a little flat. Lots of stereotypical ventriloquist jokes (Freddie helpfully plays a rimshot sound effect to punctuate the bad jokes; Beck’s trailer isn’t wired for Sam’s sound effect remote to work, so that has been left in Carly’s apartment and replaced by Freddie’s own sound design for this episode). Robbie’s act is cringey. But, in a way, that’s on-brand for *iCarly*, too. Sam knows a lot of their early stuff was pretty bad.

But Robbie isn’t just a tribute to their early missteps. Because halfway through his act, Rex changes.

Abruptly, Rex reverts back to himself. He berates Robbie for relying on stereotypes for his jokes, berates the audience for letting him, and berates the whole notion of puppeteering, of letting someone else dictate what kind of person you are. It’s an oddly inspiring little speech, the purpose of which seems to serve as a wake-up call for Robbie, who looks theatrically awed.

“You know what?” Robbie says. “You’re right. Thanks, Rex.”

“Not you!” Rex complains, “*I’m* the act, here.”

“Nope,” Robbie says succinctly. He takes Rex off of his hand and sets him down carefully. “*I’m* the act.” He finishes off his set with a few playfully self-deprecating jokes about how he’s a nerd, and he’s always has insecurities, but from pain that comes from an honest place yields comedy. It’s short, but it’s truthful, and it’s funny. If this is a piece of a fuller set, Sam thinks it could be a good one.

When Robbie is finished, Freddie turns the camera back over to Sam and Carly, who stand in their food costumes. “You ever feel like that?” Carly asks Sam.

“Like what?” Sam replies.



“Like a puppet. You know, like you’re just there to do silly, absurd, *ridiculous* things for someone else’s entertainment?”

Sam looks over at Carly incredulously. “Are you kidding?” she scoffs. “I never do a *thing* I don’t want to do.”

“Me, too!” Carly agrees fervently. “No one out there can tell me how to look, how to talk—”

“---How to dress,” Sam cuts in.

They look at each other with dawning realization, both look down at their costumes, then into the camera in growing horror.

The moment is interrupted by Rex, who cuts in to say, “That act was alright, but if you want some *real* comedy, you can book me at [rexpowers.com](http://rexpowers.com)! The nerd is optional. And if you want to hear some really good music, give it up for Andre Harris!”

The camera shifts over to Andre, who sits in front of his keyboard and gives a smile and starts playing the opening notes of his song. “This is called ‘Taking a Breath,’” he says, then a few bars later, begins to sing.

It’s a song about appreciating the good moments and letting them linger. And it’s a *delightful* song, upbeat, catchy. The kind of song that makes Sam want to dance, if Sam felt like doing things. She and Carly are changing clothes again, Sam into one of her old penny tees (“My Cheese, My Rules”...classic) and Carly into a subdued, casual outfit. Sam looks over at Carly and grins. She’s having *fun*, they’re having fun together. It all feels so natural. And with the backdrop of Andre’s song, the kind of music that feels like eating sweet barbecue on a warm summer evening, joyful and optimistic, Sam feels genuinely *happy*.

Carly smiles back at her, dark eyes twinkling, a sure sign of her own pleasure. They’re connected, like they have been for years. It’s so easy for them to fall back into their old dynamic, playful and easy, and moments like this prove they can still communicate so easily without saying a word.

When Andre finishes his song, the whole trailer feels suffused with the bright buoyancy of his music. Sam alone steps in front of the camera, and Freddie passes the camera to Robbie and joins her.

“We’ve shown you guys some really excellent talent tonight,” Sam begins, “But we don’t want you to think this is a total sausage fest.”

“Um,” Freddie frowns, “I don’t think you can say that.”

“Sure I can. It’s our show.”

“Yeah, but it’s not really—”

“Don’t look that up, kids.”

“Sam! That just means they’re gonna—”

“Oh, shut up. All it means is we don’t want you to think that we think only *guys* have talent.”

“Well, I hope they don’t think that, since they’re here for you and Carly,” Freddie says, a touch snidely.

“Yep, they’re here for us and *not* you,” Sam jabs back. Freddie looks cross, but it’s all playful, all scripted, and Sam looks into the camera. “And speaking of Carly,” she says, “Carls and our friend Tori Vega are going to enact something they’ve written together. This is *Future Tense*.”

She and Freddie step aside and Robbie points the camera toward Tori and Carly, then gently passes it back to Freddie when he’s back in place to take it.

Meanwhile, Sam heads over to change her clothes, this time into the Halloween costume she wore the year before, when she’d dressed up as Cat. It’s a little involved, so it’s good that Tori and Carly have a decently meaty scene to get through. They’d written this for fun for one of their acting classes last semester. The basic premise is that Tori is playing a fortune teller, and Carly is playing a skeptical businesswoman who on the surface seems to be in a crisis and is willing to seek guidance. But as the scene continues, it’s clear the businesswoman is actually trying to discredit the fortune teller.

Eventually, Carly as the skeptic blows up and tells Tori’s psychic character that her “visions” are as good as guessing, and starts guessing at details of the fortune teller’s life. But she keeps nailing the facts *exactly*. They’re both stunned. Carly utters an extremely cheesy line that goes something like “What if when I think I’m looking back on the past, I’m actually *seeing the future!*” Freddie accompanies this with a zoom on her face, a wavy screen effect, and a trippy sound effect. The screen goes dark for a moment, then refocuses on Tori, who is lying on the floor, in the same kind of bland outfit Carly was wearing before, having quickly taken off her fortune teller’s robe. The scene continues with the exact same dialogue as the first time, except with the roles reversed, but ends before things go on too long with Tori saying, “Something about this seems familiar...” And it’s over.

It makes very little sense, and the two of them are playing up the theatrics for the purpose of being on *iCarly*. Kind of the opposite of Beck’s performance, a very serious display of his talent. These two are willing to be ridiculous, willing to play off each other in ways that feel extremely silly. It’s good, because it keeps the talent show fresh, if people aren’t doing the exact same thing. Both Carly and Tori could have sang, and both did consider it, but elected to work together on something a little different. It also keeps the show from having too many individual songs or monologues.

After their sketch is over, Sam steps up to introduce the next act. “You ever meet someone who just...changes you?” she asks, rhetorically. “That’s the case with me and our next performer. We met, and I’ve never been the same since. Please enjoy the eclectic talents of the one, the only: Cat Valentine!”

This introduction had been something of a minor debate between Sam, Carly and Freddie. Sam had initially wanted to introduce Cat as her girlfriend on the show, but Freddie had been opposed.

"I think it distracts from the purpose and format of the show," he'd argued. "We never made a big production of it when you and I dated."

"Yeah, for two whole minutes," Sam growled. "Cat and I are a *little* different."

"You *know* how our fans are," Freddie pointed out. "A romantic connection for you would become the point of the episode, and that's not what we want! Besides, it would overshadow everyone else who is doing us a favor by coming on our show and entertaining our viewers! And..." He paused.

"What?" Sam asked, warning in her voice.

Freddie looked helplessly at Carly for a moment, then said. "And I think the fact that you're dating another girl would make it an even bigger thing. Not because there's anything wrong with it! But it would just make the news...exponentially more explosive."

"I'm not ashamed," Sam said severely. "Let people talk! If people want to be over our show because I'm gay, let them."

"Sam," Carly said gently, "I really hate to say this, but I think Freddie has a point."

"Are you *serious*?" Sam asked, glaring at Carly.

She could see hurt in Carly's eyes before they darted away, and there was a pang in her chest as she remembered all the time they spent in hiding. Sam wondered if a part of Carly had wanted to tell the world about her and Sam, and never had the chance. But all Carly said in that moment was, "I don't think you should be forbidden from coming out or anything like that. I mean, you're publicly and openly dating Cat in real life, so that's not a thing. But I do think an announcement like this...isn't the way to do it. At least not on an episode like this. If Cat were the only guest, or if we were making episodes more regularly, I might feel differently."

"That's all I'm saying," Freddie put in.

"I'm not talking to you," Sam snarled at him. He'd raised his hands defensively. Sam clenched her jaw and stared at Carly, willing her, *daring* her, to meet her eyes.

Carly did, dark eyes rising to meet Sam's, heavy with regret and frustration. Carly didn't *want* to make this request of Sam, but Sam could tell she was doing it because she truly thought it was the right choice. "I'm sorry," Carly had said quietly, and Sam felt the weight of the words, the burden they carried of so many wayward apologies stretching back through time.

Sam's eyes dropped this time, and after an apology like that, overflowing with significance, she couldn't keep fighting this point. "Fine," she relented quietly. "I get it. But I still want to make Cat's introduction a little bit special."

"I think that's reasonable," Freddie said gently. "What did you have in mind?"

And this little introduction, hinting at the significance of Cat in her life without naming it, had been the agreement they'd all come to.

That doesn't mean that Sam isn't tempted to go completely off-script and introduce Cat as her girlfriend, anyway, but she's also had time to consider what that might be like for Cat. They have some pretty intense fans out there, and she doesn't want anyone coming after Cat, even as benign as most of their fans are. So she sticks to the plan.

And when she's finished introducing Cat *as* Cat, Freddie turns the camera toward her girlfriend, who is standing in front of a little table.

"Hi!" Cat trills, "Today I'm going to teach you how to make fudge piles! But I've been told I have to give a warning." She leans in, and Freddie zooms closer. "They're chewy," she stage whispers.

Cat begins mixing her ingredients, explaining each step as she does so, and using different silly voices for each ingredient as it is added to the bowl ("I'm an egg. OW! Oh, god, my innards!"). It's extremely silly, the version of Cat that is a terrific babysitter because she speaks the language of children, and in this performance, Sam can definitely see how watching *iCarly* influenced Cat in the past.

After the ingredients are mixed, Cat shows the viewers how to add them to the pan, but instead of taking the time to put a full pan of fudge piles together, she uses a kitchen show trick to swap out her empty pan for a full one that Robbie hands her.

"Then we're going to put our fudge piles in the oven for fifteen minutes at 350 degrees," Cat tells the viewers. She opens up a cardboard oven that Sam and Freddie had put together, and slides the baking sheet inside, then pretends to twist the dials that are drawn on with Sharpie. "Okay," she says. "While they bake, what should we do? Oh! I know!"

Cat grabs a guitar (passed to her by Robbie), and plays a short little song, called the Baking Song. It's one Cat wrote herself, just a silly little ditty that isn't meant to be great music, but is entertaining and catchy and cute. Cat had mentioned to Sam that once she and her friends performed music for kids and that she'd really enjoyed it, but none of her friends did. Writing children's music isn't any sort of long-term dream for Cat, but it's something she finds fun. Plus, she'd had enough trouble trying to decide which of her talents to display, so getting to play a little bit of music during her baking demonstration had made her feel better about being "talented enough" for *iCarly*.

After the song is over, Cat looks at her (bare) wrist. "I think that's been about fifteen minutes. Let's see if my fudge piles are ready! Now, careful. They're hot," she warns, putting on oven mitts and taking the pan out of the cardboard oven. In another cooking show trick, the pan has been replaced by cooked fudge piles, though it's certainly not warm, so Cat waving her oven mitt over them and blowing on them is entirely theatrical. "Mmm, they smell *delicious*! Who wants to try a fudge pile? No one?" She offers them around the room, then shrugs. "I'll eat one." She takes a bite, and, of course, it's almost too chewy to eat. "Mmm, chewy!" she (barely) manages around her mouthful, and her sketch is over.

The camera shifts back to Carly and Sam, who are now wearing “nerd” costumes. It’s basically the bland outfit Carly wore for her sketch with Tori, but with oversized glasses, and Sam had changed into something similar during Cat’s sketch. Beck and Andre are off to the side, trying to help Cat unstick her teeth, but Sam can’t worry about that.

“Sometimes, you have a friend who you know is talented. But you just can’t say why,” Carly begins.

“Because sometimes people’s talents aren’t made for the stage,” Sam continues.

“Like, take Freddie,” Carly says, yanking Freddie into the frame (Jade is already holding the camera for him). “You all know him as our technical producer. Which means that his skills and abilities have done a lot over the years to make our show look good and sound good and to make it so you guys can even watch it!”

“So I was tempted to say, here’s the episode, that’s Freddie’s talent,” Sam gestures dismissively with her hands.

“But I know that Freddie has other talents to share.”

“*Nerd* talents,” Sam jabs playfully.

“And so, Freddie is going to display his immense trivia knowledge regarding *World of Warlords* and *Galaxy Wars*.”

“Among other nerdy nonsense,” Sam adds.

“Even if you have no idea what’s going on, you’ll be impressed by how much his brain can hold!” Carly says enthusiastically.

“And if you’re a woman, absolutely turned off, to boot!” Sam snarks.

“There are nerd women, you know,” Carly tells Sam.

Sam takes off her nerdy glasses and looks skeptically into the camera. “Are there?” she asks, and the two of them exit the frame, leaving Freddie alone.

“Hi, I’m Freddie,” he waves. “And to properly show you my talent, I need a moderator. So I asked Robbie to come up with some questions for me.”

“I might be an even bigger nerd than Freddie!” Robbie announces as he joins Freddie onscreen.

“We’ll see about that.” Freddie cracks his knuckles like he’s gearing up for a fight. It also allows him to flex his shoulders, which Sam is sure is supposed to be a sexy move. From the way Jade zooms in subtly on his muscles, it seems to work. Weird.

What follows is so dull that Sam can barely pay attention. She and Carly change into different penny tees this time, Sam into “Friend Chicken” and Carly into “Bacon Farm”,

while Robbie asks Freddie a series of incomprehensible questions and Freddie spouts off names and phrases that sound like jumbles of random letters to Sam. Nerd stuff is *so weird*.

The trivia round ends when Robbie asks some question Sam can't follow, and Freddie replies, "Ah! Trick question. Yavin IV is the location of the rebel base in *Star Wars*, not *Galaxy Wars*!"

"By golly, he's right!" Robbie crows, "Let's hear it for Freddie Benson and his amazing brain!"

Jade turns the camera back to Carly and Sam. "Well, that was really something," Carly deadpans.

"That was something all right." Sam claps loudly. "Okay! Wake up! We're back! Nerd hour is over!"

"That wasn't an hour," Carly laughs.

"Sure felt like it," Sam ribs. "Anyway, let's get back to some real talent."

"We're about to share something *spooky* with you all," Carly begins.

Immediately, the sound of an eerie voice uttering an "*Oooooooh*," fills the air, and Sam and Carly both look up. A pink bra floats in the air above them.

"Not you, George," Carly tells it.

"*Way* spookier than you," Sam agrees.

"Oh," George the Bra replies, disappointed. "I guess I'll just...be going then." And the pink bra zips away, hopefully quickly enough before any keen viewers realize it's not even remotely the same bra that used to be on their show.

"Now, this is really spooky stuff, so if you're easily scared or disturbed, maybe sit this one out," Carly tells the viewers.

"You know that's just gonna make everyone want to watch," Sam tells her.

"Well, they should, because it's great work," Carly insists.

"But don't say you weren't warned," Sam points at the camera.

"This is Jade West's short *Let Me See You*."

Freddie presses some buttons on his laptop, and Jade's short film begins to play. Everyone is watching the screen as it's streamed for the audience. Even Sam and Carly get to watch, because at this stage of things, all they have to do is change into fancy slacks and put on crazy hats.

The short starts out with extremely voyeuristic camera work, sounds of heavy breathing, a desperate male voice whispering repeatedly, “I need to see her,” as the camera seems to sift through gauzy fabric, then line up with a jagged hole in a wall, through which everyone can see a young woman, sitting at a desk in a bedroom, writing something by hand.

The sounds labored breathing continue, and the man begins whispering to himself, “What is she doing? Do something! I need to know, I need to see!” The camera shuffles around, as if the voyeuristic man is resituating himself, grunting and groaning with some unseen effort.

It’s...unsettling, to say the least. The young woman keeps writing, seeming oblivious to her secret observer, who sounds more desperate by the moment.

“I need to go to her!” the man shouts, desperately.

The girl doesn’t react in the least, and the camera pulls back to reveal that the man is wearing nondescript robes, standing in a nondescript room. The scene is grayscale, bland, unappealing, with just the man standing there, tears on his face, wringing his hands. As the camera lingers on his display of anguish, Cat whispers to Jade, “Is that...Sinjin in age makeup?”

“Yeah,” Jade answers. Her head is tilted critically as she watches her own work. “I needed someone creepy and he’s the biggest creep I know.”

“Please!” the man, apparently Sinjin, begs.

“What are you asking me for?” asks an unseen voice, clearly Jade’s, her tone a mix of pitying, amused and condescending.

“I’m sorry,” Sinjin blubbers. “I need to see her. I need her to know I’m so sorry, for everything I did wrong!”

Jade’s voice *tsks* disapprovingly. “You know that isn’t how this works.”

“I’ve been a terrible father!” Sinjin falls to his knees.

“And I’m sure she knows that,” Jade’s voice mocks. “By all means, take a look. You can see her, but you’ll never *see* her again.”

Wailing, Sinjin pushes himself toward the wall, and the camera follows his movements, and seems to move past him, into the girl’s room, where she is writing in a journal. As Sinjin cries and begs for forgiveness, the camera pushes into the girl’s journal, where on the page it can be read: *We buried my father today. I don’t even miss him.*

The credits roll.

“Jesus,” Carly breathes. “How are we supposed to go on after that?”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Jade smirks.

“Back on in five, four, three, two...” Freddie prompts. Carly and Sam jump into position.

“Well, I’ll be thinking about that one for weeks,” Carly says sincerely.

“I dunno. It was kinda funny,” Sam answers.

“Funny?” Carly asks, dismayed.

“If you have a sick sense of humor like me,” Sam answers.

“Let’s ask the filmmaker.” Carly gestures to Jade to come into the frame. “Here’s Jade West, the filmmaker!” Carly crows the introduction excitedly.

“Now, Jade,” Sam asks, moving close to her. “Is this short film intended to be funny or tragic?”

Jade looks directly into Freddie’s camera and simply states, “Yes.”

“Well, there you have it folks,” Sam says, pushing Jade out of frame so it’s just her and Carly again. “I guess that about does it for talent for today. We tip our crazy hats to you, our viewers.” Sam does so.

“Wait a minute,” Carly begins, “What about you?”

“What *about* me?” Sam asks.

“You’re talented!” Carly insists, “Aren’t you going to show us something?”

Sam scoffs, “Please, you want me to go on and do something after all of that? These are some of the most talented kids our age I’ve ever met!”

“And you’re Sam,” Carly answers. The whole show is scripted, at least loosely, and this line is no exception. It’s exactly the line Carly pitched to say in a drafting meeting, but Sam isn’t prepared for the *way* she says it. She says it like it’s two years ago, and Sam’s chest lurches.

She looks at Carly, just for a moment, and lets herself dwell in the past. “Yeah, alright,” Sam finally says. “Who has a bucket of fried chicken?”

Cat skips over to hand her the chicken, and Sam’s chest lurches again at the sight of her girlfriend. It’s weird to feel, for a moment, like she’s inhabiting two worlds, one she thought she left behind in Seattle, the other her new life in Los Angeles.

“Prompt service,” Sam comments, smiling at Cat as she walks away. “Okay, I’m gonna show you all my method for getting the cleanest chicken bones you’ve ever seen.”

And Sam does so, cleaning three chicken bones in a row, and showing off the results of her talent. Freddie helpfully plays a *ta-da* sound effect with the reveal of each bone. Sam picks up a fourth chicken leg, then shrugs. “Well, you get the idea. Now, please enjoy this interlude while I finish this bucket of chicken. We miss ya, Gibbs.”

Freddie cues up the video, which is a recording they made the other day of Dice trying to teach Goomer to say “Gibbaaaaaay,” the way Gibby says it, with mixed results. It’s both a



tribute to Gibby, and a way to include the other friends that have made Sam's life in Los Angeles special, friends whose particular talents don't really otherwise fit the tone of the show.

Unfortunately, Sam isn't actually using this time to finish her bucket of chicken. She's using it to get dressed, with Cat's help, into the rest of her suit, much like the suit she wore when she and Carly did their Jimmy Fallon tribute. Carly, meanwhile, has already been changing into her own suit with Tori's help. Since they've already put on the pants, they just have to change shirts, pull back their hair, and throw on a jacket. Carly is definitely ready by the time the short Gibby clip is over, and Sam is nearly so.

Freddie switches back to just Carly. "On behalf of all of us here at *iCarly*, we'd like to thank you for tuning in. We wouldn't be where we are if it weren't for you all out there. Whether you've been with us since day one or if this is your first time, we'd like to thank you for your support, and for supporting our guests."

By now, Sam is ready, and joins Carly in frame, the two of them looking serious and professional in their suits. Which works, because this is actually the most serious they will get during this show. "A lot has changed since we started the show," Sam begins, "We've gone our separate ways and met new people since we last aired, and some of the guests you've seen tonight are new friends we've made, and we're happy to have them in our lives."

"We don't know when we might next have time to come together and hang out with you all, but as we said last time, this isn't goodbye."

"And until then, take care, and keep having fun."

With that, all the guests gather in, and Freddie zooms the shot out and steps into the frame himself. "Until next time!" Carly smiles and waves. Freddie lets the shot linger for a little bit on the group of them waving. Sam finds herself sandwiched between Carly and Cat, with Jade over her shoulder muttering through clenched teeth about how she can't hold a smile for long.

Finally, Freddie discreetly presses a button on the remote he's carrying to turn off the camera feed, and says, "Aaand, we're clear."

## Crises < Fear

Carly is absolutely *exhilarated* by how well everything went with the show. “That was *fantastic*, you guys!” she gushes.

“Well, that takes care of my clothes-changing quota for a week,” Sam quips.

“I hope not,” Cat eyes her critically.

“Great viewership numbers,” Freddie comments, looking at his laptop. “People who came in late are starting it over from the beginning. The reception is terrific so far.”

“We did it,” Carly grins. “We really, actually did it!”

“We did!” Freddie agrees. They exchange delighted grins. Now that it’s over and done with, Carly is honestly so grateful to Freddie for pushing for this thing that she and Sam both couldn’t admit they wanted to do. It had been well worth it.

But it’s not just Freddie who has earned her gratitude. “Thank you, all of you,” Carly says genuinely to their friends. “You all did amazing!”

“No sweat,” Andre says easily. “This was fun!”

“You know, I had my reservations, but I’m glad I participated,” Jade says.

“Jade, I’m...a little surprised Freddie approved your short. That was disturbing. But so good!” Carly reassures. “I wasn’t lying when I said I’d be thinking about it for a while.”

Jade shrugs. “It’s my most family friendly piece.”

“It really is,” Tori agrees. “Also, one of your most powerful.”

“For now,” Jade amends. The way she says it, it almost sounds like a threat.

With that, though, Carly turns to the one person she knows she can’t do this without. “Sam...”

It turns out there are no words. She and Sam just hug each other. They both move to do it, in another one of those moments in which they read each other perfectly, accurately, in a split second. And it feels so natural and good and *right*, to be so in tune with Sam, for the awkwardness between them to have melted away. Carly feels *elated*, like a piece of her that has been missing has been put back into place.

But another small part of Carly feels like she’s struggling not to bawl, because she knows that this can’t last, that this tenuous balance she and Sam have found isn’t what she truly wants, and that there is no true happiness to be found here.

They pull apart and smile at each other, and Carly thinks only she can read the guardedness in Sam's eyes.

"I couldn't do this without you," she tells her genuinely.

Sam, predictably, waves her off. "Ahh, you could, it just wouldn't be as fun," she scoffs. "Alright, let's tear down this set so we can have our afterparty! We brought enough crazy hats for everybody!"

It doesn't take long, with a crew of experienced theater kids, to return Beck's trailer to its original state, and for all of Freddie's equipment to get packed away carefully and properly and stashed safely in the trunk of his car. And then, the crazy hats are distributed, the bowl of weed is packed, and the coolers of drinks are icy and open for business.

It's a whirlwind of a party, both because they're all riding high from the success of *iCarly*, and because of the various substances Carly is indulging in (Freddie is the designated driver tonight). She's chatting and laughing with Cat (who has quickly become someone whose company she loves, she always makes Carly feel at ease), she's joking around with Tori (who, she reflects, she has developed a best friend-like bond with, like the one she has with Sam, but uncomplicated by deeper feelings; there's a reason Tori is someone she feels like she can do silly sketches with), she's talking music with Andre (who, she has decided, isn't someone she's interested in romantically, but whose friendship she embraces), she's having her ear talked off by Robbie and joining Jade in teasing Beck to try to break his cool exterior and she's laughing with Freddie over things from the past.

And, most of all, she's with Sam.

Even when they aren't directly interacting, she's keenly aware of where Sam is at all times. And that connectivity that makes *iCarly* run continues. It's in the way they meet each other's eyes from across the room, at the very moment one of them is saying something the other would be interested in, or at the very moment one of them is going to get another drink and is seeing how the other one is doing. It's the way they find themselves next to each other even when they haven't planned it, the way their laughter seems to synchronize without them trying. Even when they're sometimes laughing at separate things.

Carly has no illusions about what this means. Because she can see Sam, and Sam is rarely away from Cat, her arm often around her, trading kisses with her, laughing with her. And Carly also knows that this level of closeness, combined with her own lingering feelings, aren't going to lead anywhere good.

But for now, she's a little tipsy, a little high, and a lot full of joy, and she has decided to just enjoy what she can, while she can.

Freddie will be heading back to northern California in a few days, and with him will likely go this symbiosis with Sam, in which they both pretend, for the moment, that everything is fine, and that they didn't break each others' hearts.

The next day is New Year's Eve, and even though they literally just had a party the night before, Tori is hosting a New Year's party that night. To be fair, this had been planned in advance, whereas the party at Beck's after *iCarly* had been a little more spontaneous, a natural result of everyone gathering together in a place with very little adult supervision and with very few expectations for the next day.

Freddie stays over at Sam and Cat's the night after Beck's party, since it's their turn to host him, and it turns out Carly does, too. It just makes more sense that way. Instead of driving over to drop off Carly at her apartment, Freddie just drives them all to Sam and Cat's apartment, and they both sleep out in the living room. Cat is happy to have them both, though predictably, Sam grumbles about it, but Cat knows she doesn't mind.

"I'll be glad when our living room is just our living room again," Sam mutters as they get ready for bed that night. "So I don't have to worry about waking somebody up if I want a snack at night or so I don't wake up early because you guys are chatting in the front of the house."

"Have we been waking you up?" Cat asks, concerned. "I didn't know that."

Sam softens, slightly. "Nah, you're fine," she assures Cat. "I'm just ready for things to go back to normal."

Cat can understand that. She likes having houseguests more than Sam does, that much is clear, but she also likes the pattern of routines and domesticity she and Sam have built together. That's familiar, comfortable.

Cat hopes, though, that Sam doesn't consider "back to normal" to be a return to when she kept Carly at arm's length. Because as much as Freddie is sweet and fun and Cat will miss him when he goes back to Northern California, Carly is someone Cat *really* likes having around, and it would feel really unfair for her to be so close to them in the city without seeing each other.

So she has to ask. "How are things going, with you and Carly?"

Sam looks irritated. "Fine," she says, shortly, then adds. "There's nothing to worry about."

"I'm not worried," Cat assures her. "I just..."

"What?" Sam asks, when Cat falls silent.

Cat wishes she knew how to say what she wants to say. "I just think Carly is really great," she tells Sam. "And I'm glad you two are becoming friends again."

"Yeah," is all Sam says in response. Cat has more to say, more she wants to express about this new closeness with Carly that they're both experiencing, but she can tell that, for Sam, the topic is closed.

And maybe she should wait until the very houseguest they're discussing, with her werewolf hearing, is gone to have this talk, anyway. She doesn't *think* werewolf hearing is *that* good,

but...who knows?

New Year's Eve morning is pretty low key. Though they'd all indulged last night except for Freddie, everyone moderated themselves fairly well, and no one is hung over. But they are all a little groggy after their busy last few days and their late night, so chilling out in front of the TV with coffee is the comfortable start to their morning.

After breakfast, Carly heads back to her apartment for a little while, and the easygoing day at Sam and Cat's continues, as they all are clearly conserving their energy for another party tonight. Freddie gets on his computer and does some assessment of the reception of their episode last night, citing figures and reading comments to Sam, who mostly grunts, eyes still on the TV, seeming not to listen. Cat is thrilled to hear that viewers really enjoyed the episode, though. It's like a dream come true to be on *iCarly*.

Carly comes back in the late afternoon, and they head over to Tori's that evening all together. It's Sam's night to be the designated driver, which is fair, because with Freddie heading home the next day, Tori decided that this party was also going to be his farewell party, until he comes back to Los Angeles. It's only fair that Freddie gets to drink at his own goodbye party. Cat feels a little guilty sometimes that she can't drive yet, but Sam has never pressured her to learn. And whenever it's Sam's turn to be designated driver, she always claims she doesn't mind because "The less I drink, the more room I have for snacks."

Which sounds about right.

They arrive at Tori's, where her parents are away in Santa Barbara for the holiday and Trina is attending another party, so it feels safe to let go and have a good time.

And like so many of their parties, the music that's playing through the speakers in Tori's living room is soon replaced with the music being played by the party attendants. And as people drink and smoke more, playing music gets harder, and another shift occurs, from playing music to playing karaoke videos on SplashFace and singing along to that.

Cat wants to sing with Sam, but Sam is across the room with Jade, and both of their attention is absorbed by something they're looking at and laughing at on Jade's phone. Cat can't quite catch Sam's eye, but she can be patient.

But before she can catch Sam, Carly approaches her. "Come sing with me!" Carly requests enthusiastically. She's past tipsy by this time of night, but not sloppy drunk. Happy drunk. For a group of college students, they all tend to keep their consumption on the moderate side, assisted by the fact that their hosts usually only can access smaller amounts of alcohol, all of them rationalizing that it keeps things fun and keeps them out of trouble. Tori, especially, is concerned about moderation, since a party getting out of control would be a surefire way for Mr. Vega to crack down on them. Cat, herself, tends to stay on the slightly tipsy end of things, but she also knows she usually gets the least intoxicated out of everybody.

Cat feels a flutter in her belly, a nervousness that feels misplaced, since singing publicly hasn't made Cat nervous for years. "You want to sing with me?" Cat asks.

“Of course I do!” Carly tells her genuinely. “You offered to help me when I was considering singing for that last *iCarly* episode, and I know you’re incredible! It would be an honor to sing with you!”

“Okay!” Cat agrees happily. “What should we sing?”

“I don’t know, let’s go see!” Carly encourages. But it doesn’t take long, as they scroll through some options on this karaoke SplashFace channel, that Carly spots “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.” “I love this song!” Carly squeals. “Do you know it?”

“Yeah, of course!” Cat confirms, “Let’s do it!”

They sing the upbeat song together, naturally falling into trading off lines on the verses and harmonizing on the chorus, with a few missteps that they laugh off, because they’re having *fun*. Carly has a nice voice, even if it’s clear she’s not trying to do much beyond imitating Cyndi Lauper for this song. But it’s so much *fun* to sing together, to laugh together, to be *friends*.

When it’s over, Cat’s heart is beating hard, and she’s so giddy she’s almost trembling.

“Thanks for singing with me!” Carly says, offering her a hug.

“Let’s do it again sometime!” Cat suggests.

But for right now, she has to sit down.

Across the room, she can see Sam has been watching her performance, and grinning. Cat heads over and tucks herself up against Sam, sighing and breathing her in as they snuggle. Jade is still sitting with them, though she pretends to be focused on something across the room so they can snuggle unselfconsciously. Or maybe she’s that high. She might just be couchlocked.

“You okay?” Sam asks Cat as it’s clear she’s feeling a little clingy.

“Mmhmm,” Cat answers.

Sam kisses her forehead. Cat wonders if she’s telling the truth.

-

Sam really doesn’t mind being designated driver every once in a while. Not just because she’s fine with only snacking, but also because sometimes it’s extra funny to be the one sober person in the room watching the way everyone else keeps getting more and more ridiculous. Well, not the only person, in this case. Beck is acting as designated driver for the guys tonight, but with him, sober and intoxicated look remarkably similar.

But the problem is that being sober means it’s much easier for Sam to get lost in her thoughts. And her thoughts keep returning to Carly.

It's hard for them not to. The way they've reconnected so completely over making the new installment of *iCarly* has left Sam with a palpable sense of nostalgia and reminiscence, to the point where it's easy to forget how much is different now, because things don't *feel* different. And that scares her a little. It's not like she forgets about Cat; it isn't that drastic. But the familiarity of closeness with Carly isn't easy.

She's tried to keep her distance. It isn't so easy when she feels like she's so attuned to someone else, and having Carly stay the night the evening before hadn't helped much, either, especially when it made the couch Sam was trying to sit on to relax today smell like her ex-girlfriend.

But separation isn't always possible or wanted for them. The way they keep laughing at old jokes, seeking each other out in the crowd, knowing the other is thinking the same thing they are. Sam thinks some of it should be performative, the two of them working together to make sure no one knows anything is weird in their friendship, but it's not. At this point, it's very natural for them, again, to be this close.

Luckily, Sam is surrounded by a lot of other good friends, so her instincts don't have to default to being by Carly's side all night, the way she used to be in Seattle. She spends a fair chunk of time with a pleasantly stoned Jade just watching videos on FunnyDanger.com and laughing at people's misfortunes. But the sound of Cat and Carly's duet is enough to pull her attention away from a video of someone trying to run away from an angry goat and continually slipping in mud (which, again, it's great to have friends like Jade for this stuff, because neither Carly or Cat would be into this, especially not Carly, given the angry goat content and the goat-related trauma from Carly's fifteen birthday).

Sam watches Cat and Carly sing together, unable to keep the grin off her face. "They sound great together," Jade comments, realizing that Sam is no longer watching the video on her phone.

"They really do," Sam agrees.

"I've known Cat has a killer voice forever, but I didn't know Carly could sing."

"She's just always been a natural," Sam explains.

They don't say much else as they listen to the duet, but there's not much else to say. Cat and Carly sound good, even though they're clearly just having a great time. But as she watches them, Sam starts to wonder what's next. This closeness with Carly seems untenable. Sam had made the decision to let Carly back into her life, and while she doesn't regret it, necessarily, she also knows it happened sooner than she wanted. She still needs time and space from her, especially with how easy it is to become enmeshed with her again.

But she can see, right in front of her eyes, the fact that Cat and Carly are developing their own independent friendship. And it makes her happy. She knows that Cat has liked Carly from the moment they met, and while she thinks it took Carly some time to warm up to Cat, it's clear there's mutual affection there. Sam doesn't want to stand in the way of what might be a good friendship.

Sam has never really been someone people called selfless. But most people also never know the quiet acts of love that Sam performs. Often, it cost her nothing, to do things like be protective of Carly and Cat, to put them first in her mind. It is what she wants to do anyway, so in a way, it *is* selfish, it serves Sam's own ego to be the person who is so close to them, who they rely on. But now she's stuck wondering whether she can set aside her own complicated feelings and allow this closeness with Carly to linger after Freddie leaves, for Cat's sake, and for Carly's sake, but mostly for Cat.

Oh well. Sam figures she'll just get through tonight and tomorrow, and figure things out after Freddie leaves. Maybe without him here, her dynamic with Carly might shift again.

Cat comes over to snuggle with her after her duet with Carly, and she's noticeably clingy. Sam wonders if Cat is sensing Sam's conflicted feelings about all of this, and vows to set it aside for the evening. She resolves to act like everything is normal.

Not long after, somehow they're all on the topic of detention, and Sam hears Carly mention that she did a few things to get in trouble at school, in that coy tone she gets when she's trying to be "tough".

"Oh, no you don't," Sam strides over closer to Carly. "You never did anything!"

"Sam, I got detention multiple times!" Carly protests.

It's natural, to wrap her arm around Carly to keep her in place and cover her mouth with her other hand. "Don't listen to her," Sam orders everyone around them. "The only reason Carly ever got detention was if *I* did something, and she either covered for me or got drawn into it."

Carly wrestles herself out of Sam's grasp and looks indignant for a moment, but then her expression clears. "Actually, I think she's right," Carly admits.

"She is," Freddie confirms. "Mind you, I only ever got in trouble because of Sam, too."

"That's because you were a nerd," Sam shoots back. "Carly was just good."

"It's okay," Robbie pats Freddie's shoulder. "I only got detention once and it was because of my friends, too."

"Oh, bullshit, Robbie," Jade cuts in sarcastically, "You were the reason we were all so late to class we actually got in trouble."

"I was choking on a pretzel!" Robbie defends himself.

Freddie looks at him, horrified. "You got in trouble for choking?"

Robbie sighs. "It's a long story."

"Not really," Beck says, a mild note of testiness in his voice. "That's pretty much the whole story."



“Wait a minute,” Sam remembers, “You didn’t even get detention, Freddie, you just showed up!”

“Oh, yeah!” Carly agrees, “That was the time we did the webcast from detention!”

“I remember that episode!” Tori exclaims. “Boy, that teacher of yours was a piece of work.”

“That’s a nice way to put it,” Carly replies mildly.

“Definitely one of our best episodes,” Sam reminisces.

And then they’re off to all talking about which episodes they remember. Granted, some of this came up the night before at Beck’s party, but it’s clearly a topic everyone seems to enjoy. Even Andre and Jade, who both say they didn’t watch much, each have some specific funny memories of things they saw at different times.

But Jade also doesn’t let the conversation go on indefinitely, and finally just announces, “I haven’t had a chance to sing yet. Cat, come duet with me.”

The conversations shift as Cat and Jade go over to choose a song, with Andre and Tori next to them, clearly considering their own duet options. “I’m hungry,” Sam offers as an explanation to get away from Freddie talking about model trains with Robbie, while Beck looks on with a pained expression.

“Me, too,” Carly says quickly, following Sam toward Tori’s kitchen.

Sam first stops by the fridge to pull out another root beer. Carly is kind of standing next to the fridge, leaning against the counter, so Sam looks up at her. “You need another drink?” she asks.

Carly laughs softly, “No, I should probably stop for the night.” Sam can tell from her glassy eyes, slightly bloodshot in the corners, that she’s a little drunk. But it’s the only real giveaway, because she’s standing and walking steadily, and her voice sounds normal.

“Water, then?” Sam suggests.

“Good idea,” Carly agrees, taking a bottle of Crystal Waters from Sam when she passes one up to her.

Sam cracks open her root beer and takes a healthy swig, barely suppressing a burp when she’s finished. Mostly because Cat and Jade are about to start singing, and she doesn’t want to distract them.

Sam surveys the snacks spread out on the little island in the Vega kitchen before deciding on a bag of spicy jalapeno chips. “You want some?” she offers Carly, pointing the bag toward her.

“No, thanks,” Carly replies, picking up a little paper party plate and loading some pizza rolls onto it. “I’ll stick with these.” Instead of ordering pizza like they had last night at Beck’s, Tori had anticipated that pizza delivery drivers would be spread thin tonight and instead

baked off an absurd number of pizza rolls at the beginning of the party, like two Wanko's Warehouse sized boxes. Even with all of them there plus Sam, they're still working through them all.

"Good idea," Sam agrees, tucking the bag of chips under her arm and loading her own plate.

She stays there for the moment, both because of the precarious way the chip bag is currently being held, and because Cat and Jade are dancing around the living room as they sing their song, and Sam's not sure she can get to the couch without getting in their way. Tori and Andre are still standing off to the side, backs to Sam and Carly, cheering for the singers, while Robbie, Beck and Freddie are all apparently still trying to chat between giving them their attention.

Maybe Carly is having similar thoughts about just staying out of the way for the moment, because she just stands there with Sam and watches for a time. But she's the one who breaks the silence between them.

"Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Are we okay?"

Sam turns to look at her, taking in her serious expression, even as she bites into a pizza roll. Sam shrugs, because she's been pondering this all evening and she just doesn't know. "Sure, I guess."

"I just want to know what you're thinking," Carly replies, a plaintive note to her voice.

"Because, I don't know what you're going to want after Freddie leaves."

"I don't know either," Sam says honestly.

"Things have been pretty intense," Carly says. When Sam doesn't immediately reply to that, Carly adds, "In a good way, I think. In a way that feels like old times."

"It does, but..." Sam trails off.

"Sam?" Carly eventually prompts, when Sam doesn't continue.

Sam wants to find the words to express herself, both for Carly's sake, and because she's realizing that as she talks it out, she's starting to find some clarity. "As much as things have been...pretty great, it also hasn't been easy."

"What do you mean?" Carly asks, her voice soft.

Sam doesn't look at her. It's easier when she doesn't, easier to think. So she's staring right at Cat, singing her heart out, as she finally voices to Carly what has been so difficult about all of this. "I'm struggling here, because...I still love you. And I don't want to. But I do."

Tears prickle her eyes, just for a moment before she blinks them away, clearing the image of Cat. She closes her eyes briefly, unable to believe she just said that, without even the justification of being intoxicated to excuse the confession.

She's still swimming in her own anguish when Carly replies.

"I know exactly what you mean."

Sam looks at her. Carly doesn't look drunk anymore. Her eyes are clear, deep brown, darker than Cat's eyes, but just as familiar. Eyes Sam has seen shimmer with laughter, flash with anger, glaze over with bliss. Eyes Sam has drowned in. "I—"

She has no idea what she might've said in the moment, but she's saved from saying anything she might regret by the ending of Cat and Jade's song, which swells to a final, obvious crescendo before ending with a final instrumental flair from the karaoke track. Sam, unable to clap because of her arm full of food, turns to cheer and whoop loudly, walking away from Carly without a glance back to go give Cat a peck on the lips and join her on the couch so they can watch Tori and Andre perform next.

She doesn't have to look back at Carly to know she's probably left her poor, half-drunk ex-girlfriend confused and hurt and devastated, but Sam also doesn't know what else there is left to say. She's aware—because she can't *not* be aware of Carly—that she excuses herself to the bathroom briefly, but she isn't in there long, and when she comes back out, she's wearing a relaxed smile. Sam can't tell if it's fake, but that's only because she can't bring herself to really look.

Tori, it turns out, set a timer on her PearPhone to go off a minute before midnight, just to make sure they didn't miss ringing in the New Year. While Jade calls her a nerd, Tori hurries to put on the television station that shows the ball drop in New York on a three hour delay. They've all lived on the west coast for most of their lives, and they're all used to suspending their disbelief and pretending this event is live, and for them and their own New Year's celebration.

People are counting down on the TV, and Sam turns to look at Cat, who is slightly flushed and giggles as soon as their eyes meet. "Hey," Sam says softly, gazing at her.

"Hey, yourself," Cat lilts back coquettishly.

"I love you so much, you know that?" Sam says quietly.

Cat grabs her in a hug and buries her face in her neck. "I know," she says in a voice that tugs at Sam's heart. "I love you, too."

"*Ten. Nine.*" The counting on the TV is quickly joined in by the group in Tori's living room, and all eyes turn to the TV, even as Sam and Cat keep their arms around each other. "*Eight. Seven.*" Sam is aware that everyone is coupling up, Tori standing with her arm around Jade's hip, Beck and Robbie scooting closer together on the couch. "*Six. Five.*" Sam wonders how it might feel to be Carly right now. Or even Andre or Freddie. "*Four. Three.*" Sam has never

been able to kiss someone at midnight in front of all her friends. She and Carly had never *allowed* themselves that pleasure. “*Two. One. Happy New Year!*”

She and Cat turn to each other, and Cat has just a split second to giggle before they’re kissing. It’s relatively simple, just a few short pecks, and they have a moment to gaze at each other before they hear Carly say, “Whoa, hey!”

Sam’s head turns sharply and she takes in the scene in a moment: Tori and Jade still wrapped up in each other (Jade is even openly smiling) but beginning to look over, Beck and Robbie still kissing on the couch, seemingly without a care in the world, and Carly standing with Andre and Freddie on either side of her, rubbing at her cheeks.

“Sorry,” Andre expresses, sounding remorseful. “Bad move. Guess Fred and I both kinda thought kissing you on the cheek was the best we were gonna do tonight.”

“You could’ve asked,” Carly says reproachfully. She turns to Andre and plants a deliberate peck on his lips, then turns to Freddie to do the same thing. Both boys look momentarily stunned. “Also, you could’ve just kissed each other,” Carly follows up with a wicked grin.

Andre eyes Freddie. “Want to complete the circle?” he offers.

“N-no,” Freddie stutters, cheeks reddening.

Andre shrugs. “Just thought I’d offer. No skin off my nose.” He pats Carly’s shoulder. “Thanks.”

“...Everyone okay?” Tori checks in, clearly feeling responsible for her partygoers.

“All good,” Carly assures her. “Andre and Freddie both kissed my cheeks at midnight is all, and I wasn’t expecting it.”

“In hindsight, we shouldn’t have sprung it on her, and should’ve just sprung it on each other,” Andre teases. Freddie stays silent, jaw tight.

“That’s pretty gay, Andre,” Jade says conversationally, a note of amusement in her voice. “Are we all rubbing off on you?”

“Nah. I’m just secure,” Andre says simply. “Besides, I wasn’t planning on something like *that*.” He casts his gaze over to Beck and Robbie, who are now just making out on Tori’s couch.

Beck seems to feel all the eyes on him, and pulls away, his expression as stoic as always. “Sorry,” he says, not sounding it.

“Oh, no, carry on, we were enjoying the show,” Tori says sarcastically.

“If you insist,” Beck replies easily, leaning back toward Robbie.

“*No!*” shouts Jade.

Robbie places a hand on Beck's chest and gives him a placating smile. "Later," he whispers, but because he's a little drunk, it's the loudest whisper *ever*.

It at least breaks the tension, and everyone starts laughing, even Freddie.

The party winds down in the next hour or so. Beck is the first to start encouraging Andre and Robbie to get ready to leave, though Andre keeps lingering, chatting with Tori about something. Sam isn't paying much attention. She's too focused on Cat giggling in her ear, and on ignoring Carly, across the room, chatting with Jade and Freddie.

But as Beck finally starts to make headway with rounding up his drunk passengers, Sam stands up and announces, "All right, guys. We should head out too."

"All right," Freddie says reluctantly, and he and Carly start to gather themselves.

Beck looks mildly impressed. "I'll try that next time."

"Won't work for you," Sam tells him. "You're too patient."

There's a flash of something like hurt over Beck's features. Sam can't quite understand it, but she doesn't have time to dwell on it, because they're all making their way to the door, giving goodbye hugs. Freddie, especially, is getting his extra goodbyes from all his new friends, and he looks touched by the attention.

As they get into Nona's car, Sam starts driving them back, sipping on a root beer she snagged from Tori's fridge on her way out. It's late, and she's tired, and can't suppress a yawn.

Cat notices. "Would it be easier if Carly just stayed over tonight, too?" she suggests.

Sam doesn't like that suggestion, and she's trying to figure out how to deflect it, when Carly speaks from the back seat. "I'd really rather go home, if that's alright with you."

"Are you sure?" Freddie asks. "You're not too drunk or anything?" He leans close, like he's trying to peer into her eyes.

Carly gently swats him away. "I'm fine," she assures him. "Just would rather go home," she repeats.

"It's no problem," Sam answers, her tone flat, even though she tries to sound casual. In the rearview mirror, her eyes meet Carly's, just for a second.

It's enough to let her know how hurt she is.

-

When Sam drops Carly off at her apartment, it's a relief to finally be by herself. It's the opposite of how she's felt most of the time she's been in her too-small apartment, which usually makes her feel a little lonely, a stark representation of the way her life changed to move to Los Angeles, a new city, where it had felt like she was starting over from scratch.

Except she isn't. Because she has friends here, now. Friends she shares with Sam. It hasn't been so much starting over as starting fresh, with the same person who has been a constant in her life.

The same person who clearly can't be around her anymore. Carly doesn't know what this is going to mean for their future. They've *just* figured out how to spend time together again and...they've ruined it.

Maybe Carly should have known better. She's known this whole time that she still has feelings for Sam, maybe she shouldn't have allowed herself to miss Sam so much. But she also knows that spending time together again felt like their only option, not just because of Freddie visiting, but even before that, when their shared friendship with Tori and Jade pulled them together.

The whole experience of making the new *iCarly* episode together had highlighted just how easy it is for them to just...entangle. And it had felt natural, it had felt *amazing*, it had felt like coming home.

But the more Carly thinks about it, the more she also realizes that it had complicated *both* of their feelings for each other, including the feelings she'd assumed Sam had left behind as she started her new relationship with Cat. And that has put the entirety of *iCarly* into a new perspective.

*iCarly*, itself, it seems, is a tribute to what it's like for Sam and Carly to be in love. Even long before they admitted their feelings to each other. Carly knows that Sam had harbored a crush for a while before they even started kissing. She also knows that she had hid from her own feelings for a long time. So long that it's difficult to pinpoint when they'd even started, but it is obvious, of course, that they must've started before the first day she'd kissed Sam.

Falling into those old dynamics, the best friendship that had been the heart of *iCarly*, had pushed her and Sam closer to the dynamics of their relationship. Because, Carly knows, those things had *always* commingled. Friendship and love. Loyalty and devotion. Trust and desire. Intimacy and sensuality. She and Sam had been each other's friends and even *family*, and they'd shown it, live, in front of the world, a coded message that only they understood.

Even though Carly, at least, hadn't understood it until much later. Not really.

And now...they're in love. Again. Or maybe, still. Because Carly doesn't think she ever really stopped, and she wonders if Sam ever did, either.

Carly hadn't expected the feeling of reciprocal love to be so devastating, but she's here, slightly drunk and alone in her tiny studio apartment, bland and boring not because it's a fresh start but because that's how her life has felt without Sam in it, and she doesn't know what else to do other than cry.

-

Jade just wants to have a nice day in with her girlfriend. But she should've known things can't be that simple.

She stays the night at Tori's after the New Year's party, of course. They have the house to themselves, now that their guests are gone, and Tori's parents won't be back until tomorrow evening, at the earliest. Neither of them are certain of Trina's plans, except that she's not coming home tonight.

So, really, it's the perfect opportunity to get some *quality* time together.

They're both tired after the party as they head upstairs, but neither of them are exactly letting that stop them. Jade pins Tori up against her bedroom door almost as soon as she shuts it, kissing her, letting her body settle flush against Tori's.

As she trails lips over Tori's neck, Tori pants, "Remind me tomorrow that I have something I need to talk to you about."

Jade stills, slightly irritated at the interruption. "Is it important?"

"Yeah," Tori breathes.

Jade hates having things hang over her head. "Then do we need to—"

"No," Tori insists, grabbing Jade by her hair and reconnecting their lips. Jade groans, already content to leave Tori's weird pronouncement in the past if it means Tori's about to get a little dominant with her.

They make their way around Tori's bedroom, shedding clothes along the way, until they're on the bed, and Tori's on top of her, fingers inside of her, teeth and tongue all over her breasts, and by the time Tori is done with her, Jade doesn't think she can move at all. Which Tori uses to her advantage, straddling Jade's face, the sound of her moans as she lifts her face to the sky like the echo of a howl, her movements primal, greedy, as she grinds against Jade's mouth.

Jade is so entranced by the vision that she thinks that if her own moans weren't muffled against Tori's flesh, they'd be loud enough to wake neighbors.

They fall asleep together soon afterwards, facing another new year together, and Jade hopes they'll start the next day off with a bang or two, again.

They sleep late, and though they're not hungover, Jade definitely needs some extra coffee to get moving today. Tori makes bacon and eggs, winking that they'll need the energy for their day in, and Jade gulps her coffee, hoping to get her brain in gear faster.

She remembers, vaguely, Tori talking about needing to talk to her, but hasn't mentioned it. Tori hasn't, either, probably because she's waiting for Jade to be caffeinated enough to function properly.

But before that can even happen, Jade gets a text from Cat.

**Hi!!!!!!**

**Are you still at Tori's?**

Jade rolls her eyes. As if that's any question.

**Of course**

Cat responds right away.

**Oh good!**

**I'm coming over because I need to talk to you**

Jade's displeasure must show on her face, because Tori asks her, "What's up?"

"It's Cat," Jade says slowly, debating how to respond. "She says she's coming over because she needs to talk to me. Or maybe us, I'm not sure." She sends her reply.

**Now??**

"Oh." Tori sounds apprehensive. "Um, you and I should probably talk first."

**I'll be there soon!**

"Soon" is awfully subjective, especially coming from Cat. "Well," Jade says, "We'd better talk quickly, because Cat will be here soon. And I'd rather not look like complete garbage when she gets here."

"I'm sure she won't mind," Tori replies, but then amends her statement quickly as Jade shoots her a withering glare, "Not that you look like garbage! At all!"

"I'm going upstairs to change," Jade says decisively, topping up her cup of coffee and heading for the staircase.



Tori is right behind her. “Did Cat say what she wanted to talk about?” she asks.

“Nope.”

“Is Sam with her?”

“I assume so, how else would she get here?”

“Okay, um.” Tori sounds awkward. “That might be...weird.”

“Why?” Jade asks. They’re in Tori’s room by now, and Jade is digging around in her bag for her bra. She pulls out the shirt she’d been planning to wear today. The plan had been to shower first, but, well, Cat is throwing a bit of a wrench in that plan. Whatever. She has a couple shirts in Tori’s dresser, she can grab one of them if she really needs to.

“Because, well, this is what I wanted to talk to you about,” Tori replies. Jade can *hear* her wringing her hands. Not, like, the action. But the tone in Tori’s voice gives her away.

Jade stands up, holding her bra, and turns to look at Tori, who is, indeed, fidgeting with her hands. Jade raises an eyebrow. “You said it was important. And it has to do with Cat?”

Tori nods, pressing her lips together. “It’s just that, last night, during the party. I overheard Sam and Carly talking.”

“Oh, no, friends talking,” Jade says sarcastically, pulling on a pair of jeans. “Just because they’re exes doesn’t mean they can’t be friends. Look at Beck and I.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” Tori answers, an edge to her tone. “And it’s a little different because Beck is gay. And also, because what I overheard was Sam and Carly admitting to each other that they still have feelings for each other.”

That makes Jade pause just as she begins to take her pajama shirt off. “Oh.”

“*Yeah*,” Tori says significantly.

“That’s a little different from me and Beck.” Jade continues to pull off her shirt.

“No kidding.” Tori rolls her eyes, then her gaze fixates on Jade’s bare chest. “What do I do?” she asks Jade’s boobs.

Jade sighs. “Tori,” she says in a slightly disapproving tone.

Tori blinks, and raises her eyes to Jade’s face. “Sorry,” she mumbles. “But I don’t know what to do. I’m not good at this...friend drama stuff.”

“And you think *I* am?” Jade asks incredulously as she latches her bra and spins it around her torso to put it on.

“Yes!” Tori answers, insistent, desperate.

“I don’t know how to have friends!” Jade counters.

“Oh, please, everyone knows you’re a good friend when you actually care to try,” Tori says. It’s weird, that it feels like they’re having a fight right now, over something that actually has nothing to do with them. Tori pinches the bridge of her nose for a second, then finally turns to her dresser to get out a clean shirt. “What do we do if that’s what Sam and Cat want to talk about? What do we don’t if it *isn’t*?”

“Well, if Sam’s there, we don’t bring it up at all,” Jade replies.

“*Obviously*. But do I tell Cat? Like, another time?”

“I don’t know,” Jade answers. “I don’t...I don’t think so.”

“Really?” Tori asks, incredulously. “Are you telling me that if someone had found out that Beck liked someone else while he was dating you, you wouldn’t have wanted to know?”

Jade side-eyes her, hard. “Are you trying to tell me something?”

“No!” Tori splutters as she changes her shirt. “I just—I know what you can be like.”

“And this isn’t about me and my jealousy issues,” Jade replies. “This is between Sam and Cat. I think, at the very least, we should give Sam more than, like, twelve hours to talk to Cat about this before we go running our mouths.”

Tori seems to subside a bit. “Okay. That makes sense.”

“Hey,” Jade says in a soft tone, trying to bring the intensity of this whole exchange down. “I’m sorry. I’m a little frustrated about Cat randomly dropping by, I’m still finishing my coffee. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Tori sighs. “I don’t mean to treat you like you have all the answers. It’s just that you have good instincts about people, and I, well, don’t always.”

Jade snorts loudly, then holds up her hands. “Sorry, sorry,” she says quickly.

“I deserve it.” Tori smiles wryly, then reaches over to hug Jade. Jade sighs, letting the warmth of Tori’s affection seep into her bones.

Downstairs, the doorbell rings. *Damn*, Cat meant it when she said soon. “Put some pants on,” Jade instructs Tori, “I’ll go let Cat in.”

“I’ll be down in a jiffy!”

“I’ll be down in a jiffy,” Jade repeats in the Sweet Sally Peaches voice she sometimes uses to mock Tori. Actually, she hasn’t used it in a while. Maybe that should change. Especially if Tori is going to keep using words like *jiffy*.

“I don’t—” Tori calls after her as she leaves the room.

“—talk like that!” Jade finishes with her as she heads downstairs quickly, and can hear knocking as she gets close. “I’m coming, goddamn!” she calls as she reaches the bottom of the stairs.

She unlocks and opens the door to find Cat standing on the doorstep. “Hi, Jade!” Cat says excitedly, flinging herself at her in a hug.

“*Oof*.” Jade tolerates it for a few seconds before extracting herself from Cat’s (bizarrely strong) hug-grip. “Hi.”

“Where’s Tori?”

“She’ll be down in a minute.” In fact, Jade can hear her on the staircase as they speak. “Where’s Sam?”

“Oh, Freddie wanted to get brunch with just Sam and Carly before he left town, so they’re off doing an *iCarly* brunch.”

“Then, how did you get here?”

“My Nona. She needed to go buy some kind of old lady makeup at a specific store, so she gave me a ride!”

“Right,” Jade mutters.

“Hi, Cat!” Tori greets as she reaches the bottom of the stairs. Already, she sounds awkward. Sometimes Jade doesn’t understand how Tori can be so good at acting when she’s such a mess in real situations half the time.

“Hi, Tori!” Cat greets.

“Um, you want some coffee or anything?” Tori asks. Her tone already sounds sympathetic.

“No, thanks! I had enough today.”

Jade decides to get right to the point. “When you said you needed to talk. Did you mean just to me, or to Tori, too?”

Cat looks between them. “I can talk to both of you.”

Tori seems uncertain. “Oh, um, I don’t have to if—”

“Sit,” Jade orders Tori.

“It’s *my* house,” Tori grumbles, then adds, “Why don’t we all have a seat?”

She and Jade sit on one couch, and Cat sits on the other. Cat picks up one of the throw pillows and holds it on her lap, emitting a nervous giggle.

“So...?” Jade prompts.

Cat looks up at her. "You want me to, like, just say it?"

"That's why you're here, isn't it?"

Cat recrosses her legs, shifting to lean a little closer to her friends. "I'm worried that maybe Sam and I are going to break up," she says quietly, her tone dramatically shifting from its usual cheerful lilt.

Beside her, Jade hears Tori take in a sharp breath. She places a hand on her knee to encourage her not to jump to any conclusions. "Okay," Jade says evenly. "What brought this on?"

Cat's mouth twists awkwardly. "I don't know. Things are different. I'm worried we might..." she trails off.

"Have you been fighting more?" Jade guesses.

"No!" Cat answers promptly. "No, we rarely fight. We bicker over chores sometimes, but we haven't really fought since we got together."

"Is the sex not good anymore?" Jade asks.

"*Jade*," Tori admonishes.

"Hey, it's a valid question," Jade defends, then looks expectantly at Cat.

Who is bright red as she answers, "N-no, that's still, um, that's still really, really good."

"Then...you're getting bored?" Jade suggests.

Cat shakes her head. "Being with Sam means I'm *never* bored."

"You've just fallen out of love, then," Jade decides, because it's the only other thing she can think of. "Sam just feels like a friend to you now?"

"I...I mean, Sam is my friend. She's always been my friend. And I don't really think the way I feel about her is any different, but, it *must* be...because..." Again, Cat trails off.

Tentatively, Tori speaks. "Do you think there might be...someone else?"

Cat blushes, almost as red as she did when Jade asked her about sex. "I..."

Jade knows that Tori had been probing about what she overheard the night before, but she can tell Cat is reacting to something different. "Ooh," she nods. "You have a crush on someone else."

"Yeah," Cat finally admits in a whisper. "But like, if this is a crush, it's...pretty major."

"*Ooh*," Tori nods slowly. "Oh, Cat," she murmurs sympathetically.

Jade squeezes her knee to keep her from going too far in a negative direction. "So you think that because you maybe fell for somebody else that it means you're supposed to break up

with Sam,” Jade assesses.

Cat tilts her head. “If I really loved her, I’d have eyes only for her.”

Jade takes in a deep breath. “Okay, that’s bullshit.”

She hears Tori’s quiet gasp of surprise at Jade’s pronouncement, sees Cat lift her head, eyes wide. “It is?” she asks, astonished.

“Of course it is. Crushes are totally normal. Like, okay. Think of it this way. I was your best friend for a long time. Then Tori moved here, and you guys clicked right away, and Tori became your best friend, right?”

“Yeah,” Cat nods.

“But was I any less of your best friend just because you had Tori, too?”

“No, but—but that’s different,” Cat answers, though she sounds doubtful.

“If you can love more than one person as a best friend, why can’t you love more people in other ways, too?” Jade counters.

“I um, I always thought—I always thought the kind of love I shared with Sam was special.”

“It is,” Jade answers. “It’s unique to the two of you. I’m just saying there’s not a limit to love.”

“That’s pretty deep,” Tori says, sounding awed as she looks at Jade.

“Look, okay.” Jade tries another tactic, because Cat is still sitting there, brow scrunched. “I used to date Beck. And I loved him, I really did. But that didn’t mean that the two of us didn’t like other people.”

Tori laughs out loud. “I’m sorry, are you really using you and Beck as an example? We all watched you spend half of high school terrorizing him every time you thought he might have so much as *looked* at another girl.”

“Yeah, well, turns out I should have kept an eye on when he looked at other boys,” Jade says dryly. “And yes. Because the reason I was so worried about *him* looking was because *I* was looking, myself. And I figured if I was doing it, so was he. And it turns out I was right.”

Tori is staring at her in fascination. “And who were *you* looking at?” she asks coyly.

Jade glares at her, then turns her attention to Cat. “I loved Beck. But at the same time that he was trying to love me the best he could, he was falling in love with Robbie. And I...I was crushing on Tori.”

“You were?” Cat asks. “That’s so cute!”

Tori shakes her head. “I seem to remember that you hated me.”

“I hated how you made me feel. Because I was where Cat was once. I thought that if I thought about someone else it meant that I loved Beck less. But the longer it went on, the clearer it was that I still felt the same way about Beck, even though I liked someone else, too.”

“When did you start liking me?” Tori asks with interest.

“I don’t know,” Jade answers irritably. She hadn’t really expected to have to delve into this old crush. It had been easier when she let Tori believe they had fallen for each other after Jade broke up with Beck. That was a cleaner narrative. “When you took detention rather than rat me out for the stage fighting thing, maybe,” she offers, avoiding Tori’s eyes.

“You—I—that long?”

“Which is *part of my point*,” Jade says pointedly. “I liked Tori. A crush feels shiny and new. It can make a deeper love feel *less* exciting. But that deeper love can still be there, just as powerful.” She looks at Cat. “You still love Sam?”

“With all my heart,” Cat says without hesitation, then frowns. “Well, it *feels* like with all my heart, but I also—”

“Your heart is big enough to fit a lot of love. It’s big enough to share.”

“That’s *so sweet*,” Tori coos.

“Shut up,” Jade replies. “Love doesn’t have to be limited like...like a pie. It’s not like you have to either divide up your love between multiple people or just give it all to one person and not leave any room for anyone else. Love can just exist and be as big or as much as you want.” She squeezes Tori’s knee again, to keep Tori’s *awws* to a minimum.

“That makes a lot of sense.” Cat is grinning now, but then her expression turns serious. “So then, what do I do?”

Jade shrugs. “Just because you like someone else doesn’t mean you have to act on it. Beck and I were faithful and monogamous to each other the whole time we were together, even if we both liked other people. You can’t help the way you feel, what matters is if your actions reflect what you care about.”

“But it’s—these feelings, it’s *a lot*.”

“Then maybe you can talk about it with Sam, if she’d understand it. That was why Beck and I fought all the time. We weren’t honest about how we were feeling. Maybe if we’d have been able to be honest, we wouldn’t have been at each other’s throats so much.” She pauses. “Of course, if we’d been able to be honest, maybe he would have figured out he was gay a lot sooner and we would’ve broken up. But I don’t think you’re about to have that same problem.”

Cat giggles. “I’m definitely not about to realize I’m straight.” She looks thoughtful. “I think I’ll just see what happens if I just let myself have a crush for a while. I don’t think Sam needs

to know quite yet.”

“I think that’s fine,” Jade answers.

“Yeah, because I would imagine even if you *know* it’s normal for your partner to have a crush, it still might hurt to hear about it,” Tori adds pensively.

Cat nods, then checks her phone. “Oh! Nona’s coming back to get me soon.”

“Well, thanks for dropping by,” Jade drawls snidely.

They make small talk with Cat for the next few minutes, until her Nona arrives, and she practically skips out of Tori’s house to meet her.

Tori closes the door behind her and leans against it, looking at Jade with wide eyes. “Who do you think Cat likes?”

Jade shrugs. “Freddie, probably.”

“Freddie?” Tori sounds surprised.

“Sure,” Jade answers easily. “He’s cute, he’s new around here, and Cat’s not gay. Plus, she liked *Robbie*. Freddie’s nerdy too, but at least better looking.”

“I guess,” Tori sounds doubtful. Then she fixes Jade with an amused, slightly flirtatious expression.

“Whaaaat?” Jade groans.

“I just had no idea you were so...evolved,” Tori replies.

“Well, don’t worry, because I’m not,” Jade answers succinctly.

Tori frowns. “What do you mean?”

Jade shrugs. “With everything I just told Cat,” she waves a hand. “Knowing it is one thing. Actually *feeling* it is another.” Tori sits down next to her, expression curious, so Jade continues. “Look, part of the reason I never told you about that crush is because I still don’t feel great about how that happened. I *know*, intellectually, that it’s normal to have crushes and it doesn’t mean anything about your current relationship. But that doesn’t mean I didn’t feel *bad* about it. I *still* feel bad about it sometimes. Even though, in my case, it *did* mean something about my relationship with Beck. He and I were both far better matched with other people, because of our sexualities.”

“I’m sorry about teasing you,” Tori laments. “It’s just, well. I thought it was cute.”

“I get it. It’s cute because it all worked out in the end. Beck and I crushed on people who were better partners for us as we struggled to make our connection work. But I can’t help thinking, what if it *hadn’t* worked out for the best? What if you hadn’t been into me, or Robbie had been, by some hideous miracle, straight? Would I still feel justified in the time I

spent indulging in my feelings for you, or would I lament them, as opportunities I lost to connect with Beck while we were still as in love as we could be?" Granted, Jade had still been a bit in denial about her feelings, so "indulging" in her feelings for Tori were mostly about *tormenting* Tori, but still.

Tori nods, slowly. "I get that, I think."

"So on the one hand, I don't want Cat to worry and break up a perfectly good relationship just because she has eyes and can see that other people are desirable. And it'd be great if she doesn't end up with the same hangups I have. Because I *do* have those hangups. What you said about, even though you know it's normal, it still hurts to hear your partner likes someone else? That's me. That would make me feel awful."

"Well, then," Tori says cautiously, "If I ever get a crush, I'll be sure not to tell you."

Jade exhales, somewhere between a sigh and a groan. "See, I hate that. Part of the fun of being queer is supposed to be being able to appreciate other hot people together. And I never want you to feel like you need to *hide* anything from me."

"But I never want to poke at an insecurity of yours if it's easy for me to leave it alone," Tori counters.

Jade is quiet for a moment, then says, "I guess."

"But, Jade," Tori says, "*this* is why people come to you for advice. You just...you're so *good* with people."

Jade laughs hollowly. "I'm 'good' with people because I think they're awful and I like to watch them be awful. I'm not some *visionary*."

Tori laughs. "*Still*," she insists. She cuddles up to Jade, who welcomes her affection. "I guess I *know* people can be terrible, but...I don't like to think on it so much. Maybe it makes me too optimistic sometimes. Like if I just leave everything alone and don't do anything, it'll all work out."

"In my experience, it rarely works out, not without a lot of work," Jade counters.

"Yeah," Tori says heavily, "I guess that's what I'm afraid of." They're quiet for a minute as they sit together, holding each other. Then Tori says, "I think I know what you mean about not wanting to hear about a crush. But I guess I still want to know...have you had crushes since we got together?"

Jade pulls away enough to eye Tori. "Are you sure you want to talk about this?"

"I guess I'd maybe rather know, even if it hurts. Because you're still with me, and that's what matters."

"Well," Jade says slowly, "the answer for me is no. I really haven't had any crushes since we got together. Not, like, on actual people. Celebrity crushes don't count."



“Yeah, I’ve never considered Joan Jett to be a threat to our relationship,” Tori laughs, but she looks a little surprised. “Really?” she questions.

“Yes, really,” Jade says irritably. “But that’s not because we’re a perfect match or that I’ll never have a crush again if you keep being a great partner. It wasn’t the flaws in my relationship with Beck that made us have crushes. It’s just...an opportunity thing. I honestly thought I might get crushes on people I met at film school, but everyone has been so...ugh.”

Tori laughs, “I know what you mean. The only person I’ve really felt like I clicked with at school has been Carly, but I don’t have a crush on her.”

“Still, me saying all this is because I *know* that’s what’s supposed to be true. I’m still not sure I believe it,” Jade admits. “I’m still not sure that I won’t have some kind of crisis if I have a crush and maybe we’re in a rough spot or something. But it won’t change how I feel about you, or how devoted I am to you. That much I can promise you.”

“I can promise the same to you,” Tori agrees. “*If* I ever get a crush on anyone other than you.”

“You will,” Jade states.

“You know, I liked you before we got together, too,” Tori admits.

Jade smiles. “I think you told me that before.”

“I might’ve,” Tori agrees. “But I don’t think I told you the part where it was also like...the wolf part of me knew first. I always...I always really liked the way you smelled. I was...*drawn* to it.”

“Is *that* why you were constantly trying to get me to hug you?” Jade asks archly.

“No. Well, not entirely. I *did* want to be friends with you. And then I couldn’t understand why I kept being attracted to someone who was so mean to me.”

“That’s because you’re a glutton for punishment,” Jade smirks.

Tori just rolls her eyes. “Say the girl who’s always talking about the *good* kind of pain,” she shoots back. “But before I let myself really consider how I felt about women, and especially you...a part of me knew. A part of me saw through you. *Smelled* through you, really.”

“That’s disgusting.” But it is also pretty flattering. “I’d say I’m sorry for always being such an asshole—”

“Don’t be,” Tori reassures her. “I think that history actually makes our connection stronger.”

“Good, because I was about to say I’m not actually sorry. That was how I dealt with everything at the time.”

“And now, here we are,” Tori says loftily. “In love, despite the fact that you used to be *the worst*.” She glares playfully.

“Maybe I can find a way to make it up to you,” Jade suggests. When Tori looks at her, she smirks and raises an eyebrow, delighted to see the way Tori immediately begins to look flustered.

“Maybe you can do that now, before Trina shows up back here,” Tori says in a low voice.

“*Ugh*. Maybe I’d rather not, since you mentioned your sister.”

“Pretty sure I can make you forget about her,” Tori murmurs as she kisses along Jade’s neck.

Somehow, the tables have turned, and Jade is the one who ends up being seduced. But she’s certainly not complaining.

Later on, as they’re snuggling up together in Tori’s bed, in post-coital bliss, they hear the front doorbell ring.

Jade looks at Tori, alarmed. “Is Trina home?” she asks, because it’s the first thing she can think of.

“She’d just come in. Unless she lost her keys, I guess.” Tori gets out of bed, legs still shaky from her recent orgasm, and gropes for her pants. Jade rolls over to reach for her own pants, and as she does, she realizes her pocket is buzzing.

She pulls out her phone. Beck is calling her. “Why is Beck calling me?” she wonders aloud.

“I don’t know, maybe answer it and find out?” Tori suggests in a harried tone.

Jade rolls her eyes, but answers. “What?”

“Hello to you, too,” Beck replies. “I’m here.”

“You’re—you’re *where*?”

“I’m at Tori’s front door,” he says slowly.

“Why?”

“I texted you,” he answers impatiently, or, impatiently for Beck.

Jade moves her phone away from her ear to check her text messages and, yep, there are texts from Beck, saying he needs to talk to her and is coming over. “Sorry,” Jade says sarcastically, “I was a little *busy* with my girlfriend.”

“More than I needed to know,” Beck answers. “Can you come let me in already?”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll be right down.” She hangs up. “It’s Beck. At the front door,” she tells Tori. “Apparently, he needs to talk to me, too.”

“You’re popular today,” Tori muses. “Well, come on, then.”

Jade groans, but rolls out of bed and tosses on her clothes. Will she ever actually have a chance to shower today?

They go downstairs and let Beck in. “Finally,” he grumps as he comes inside.

“Sure, hi, welcome,” Jade returns, just as hostilely.

“Hi, Beck,” Tori greets, “How are you?”

But before he can answer, Jade pushes that query aside. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Okay.” Jade folds her arms. “Just to me? Or to both of us?”

Beck looks between the two women uncertainly, then sighs. “I guess Tori can stay. You’ll just tell her everything, anyway.”

“I *might* not,” Jade counters.

“No, it’s fine.” Beck waves a hand, then slumps onto one of the couches. Tori takes a seat on the other couch, but Jade stands, arms still folded, a mild power move, keeping Beck lower than she is. Beck sighs, runs his hand through his hair. “I’m worried Robbie might be cheating on me.”

Jade exchanges a look with Tori and tries to hide her smile. For all the times she worried about Beck cheating on her, there is a bit of a sadistic thrill that he’s now in the position he put her in so many times, because he’d never taken her insecurities seriously. “Oh, really?” she asks. “What brought this on?”

“Well,” Beck starts, “It’s because...I think he likes Freddie.”

“Seems to be a lot of that going around,” Tori murmurs.

Beck frowns. “What?”

“Nothing,” Jade waves a hand. “He’s just a popular guy, being new to the friend group.”

“I guess.” Beck still looks unhappy. When no one says anything else, Beck says in a frustrated tone, “Well? What should I do?”

“Wait, back up a minute,” Jade says, finally sitting on the couch next to Tori to face Beck more squarely. “What evidence do you have that he might be cheating?”

Beck shrugs sullenly. “He’s...he’s always talking to him, or about him. It’s pretty clear that he likes him.”

“Well, no one’s disputing *that*,” Jade replies. “That’s been obvious since the two met last winter and ended up in the hospital together.”

“Really not making me feel better,” Beck says harshly.

“But...just talking to someone doesn’t mean he’s cheating,” Tori puts in tentatively.

“Yeah, this is *Robbie Shapiro* we’re talking about,” Jade adds. “And he’s dating the *hottest* guy he’s ever met. He should know how lucky he is. And he should also know how slim the chances are that anyone else is ever going to want him.”

Beck full-on glares. “You don’t get it. You’ve never understood how much Robbie brings to the table. But other people do.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Tori says soothingly, “But, isn’t Freddie straight?”

Jade hums uncertainly, making Tori look at her in surprise, but Beck sighs in frustration. “Okay, but even if he and Freddie aren’t *physically* cheating, it sure feels like he’s... *emotionally* cheating on me.”

“So what you’re saying is, you’re upset that you don’t have one hundred percent of his attention all the time?” Jade asks.

Beck presses his mouth together in annoyance. “Can you at least *try* to be sympathetic?”

Jade laughs. “I would if there was anything to be upset about! So what if he likes someone else? He likes you and he’s with you. And I really doubt he’s about to cheat on you with Freddie. But if it’s really bothering you, you need to talk to him.”

“I guess,” Beck says again, sounding uncertain. “But, what do I even say?”

“You remember all the times I was sure you were cheating on me?” Jade asks.

Beck grimaces. “Of course. And I *wasn’t*.”

“Obviously. But don’t confront him like I confronted you. Make it a conversation.”

“Like *how*?” he challenges. ““Oh, Robbie, what do you think about Freddie, he’s cute, huh?”” he says in a mocking tone.

“Well, what *do* you think about Freddie?” Tori asks.

“I don’t—I don’t really have an opinion,” Beck says in a forced casual voice.

“Yeah, I don’t believe you’re completely neutral on the guy that’s causing you *this* much anxiety about your relationship,” Jade drawls.

Beck throws up his hands. “Fine. I’ve always thought Freddie was cute. I had a crush on him years ago, and the work he put into his body doesn’t hurt. But right now, knowing Robbie is seeing the same things I used to, that makes it much harder.”

“If you can sympathize with Robbie *possibly* having a crush on him, then maybe you two can talk and you can have an *actual* conversation that makes you feel better. Because Robbie will

assure you that he loves you and he's not planning to run away with Freddie."

"And since you *both* think he's attractive, maybe it's something that could be fun to talk about someday!" Tori suggests brightly.

Jade nudges her. "It's too early for him to think like that. He's too busy being butthurt that he's not so perfect he makes all other men invisible."

Beck rolls his eyes. "I've never thought that," he mumbles.

"Talk to Robbie," Jade summarizes, trying to end the conversation.

Beck nods slowly. "Okay. Okay, thanks."

"You're welcome." Jade smiles, and Beck smiles back. It's a small exchange, but it emphasizes how well they regard each other. "Now get out of here. Tori and I have plans."

"Yeah, yeah," Beck rolls his eyes. "Thanks, you two."

"Good luck!" Tori says brightly as she ushers him out the door. She smirks at Jade as she shuts the door behind him.

Jade holds up a hand. "If you start on that thing about how I give such good advice, I'm leaving."

Tori laughs. "Don't worry, I won't say it. Because obviously, you already know that."

Jade groans. Tori kisses her. Jade hopes that whatever she *thinks* she knows about relationships will help her keep this one going for the long haul.

## That has become known. Solitude

Brunch with Freddie before he leaves town is terribly awkward.

Luckily, miraculously, Freddie doesn't seem to notice. But Sam is acutely aware of Carly, next to her in the booth at Bots, and she can't stop thinking about what they told each other the night before.

But, as people say, the show must go on, and this is the final show before Freddie leaves town, and then she and Carly can go back to...well, whatever they're going to go back to. Honestly, Sam doesn't know.

Freddie is carrying most of the conversation, and luckily it's easy for Sam and Carly to just chime in to things he's saying, and say little to each other. Sam can sense Carly's discomfort, too. They haven't talked about last night—they *can't* talk about last night—and it leaves them in a position of barely being able to look at each other. Which is why they're sitting next to each other, so they can, ironically, avoid each other as much as possible.

Instead, Sam is here looking at Freddie's stupid, happy face as he thanks them for all the fun he had, talks about the places he saw and the friends he made, updates them on what people are saying about their most recent episode of *iCarly*. It's all very banal, mostly things Freddie has already expressed, anyway, but this time more like a recap of his whole trip, like some kind of performance evaluation at a job (Sam remembers people talking about their performance evaluation meetings all the time when she worked at the Pear Store, though she didn't work there long enough to have one of her own).

It's pretty easy to just smile and laugh along with Freddie and assure him she's happy he visited (because, in spite of what happened last night, Sam *is* mostly happy he came to visit; it certainly made the last couple of weeks more interesting). But then Freddie says, "I was thinking I might come down for Spring Break. I'd definitely rather come here than go home to my mom." He shudders.

For the first time all through the meal, Sam and Carly exchange a glance. Just looking at Carly is enough to make Sam's stomach clench and flutter at the same time, anxiety and exhilaration swirling through her, making her feel like finishing her food isn't going to be possible.

Freddie notices. "What?" he asks, looking between them, concerned.

Carly just chuckles disarmingly. "I'll be honest, I don't even know when my spring break *is* yet. But we had this problem with fall break. No one's breaks lined up. So I guess we're just concerned it won't end up being a good time for either of us."

"Oh. Right," Freddie answers uncertainly. He shakes his head, amused. "I'm always impressed by how much you two can say to each other with just a look."

"Yeah, well," Sam says dismissively, "Just what happens when you're best friends for years."

“I guess so,” Freddie says fondly. His expression shifts to something more pensive. “I always kind of felt like I was one of your best friends, too.”

“Oh, Freddie, you were. You *are*,” Carly tells him sympathetically. “It’s just, with Sam and I, things are different.”

“No, I know. I’m a guy. I...spent too long kind of chasing Carly, and that doesn’t lead to real friendship. But...” He seems to be choosing his words carefully. Involuntarily, Sam looks over at Carly again, both wondering what he’s about to say. “I just hope that I never said or did anything that made you two feel like you couldn’t tell me about you.”

The two girls exchange another glance, and Sam can see that Carly is wondering the same thing: how much has Freddie figured out?

Carly takes the lead on their response. “It wasn’t you,” she tells Freddie. “It was just... complicated.”

“No, I get it, I get it,” Freddie says quickly. “Sexuality *is* complicated. I guess that, for as close as we were and have been, we were never close enough for that. And that’s, you know, that’s okay.”

“Well, you know now,” Carly says. “That’s what matters.”

“Yeah,” Freddie nods. “Thank you for trusting me. I’ve got to admit, it’s been interesting getting to know all your friends, too. I never really would’ve thought I could fit in so well in a group like that. Of course, I never knew my best friends were...not straight, so...”

“You can say gay,” Sam tells him bluntly.

“Or queer,” Carly amends.

Freddie reddens, slightly. “I’m still getting used to it. I don’t have a problem with any of it, but I’m still getting used to it. You and your artistic crowd are *very* different from all the computer engineer types I hang out with at my school.”

“Yeah. We’re fun,” Sam counters.

For once, Freddie doesn’t seem to disagree. “Yeah,” he says wistfully, “You really are. Look, okay, maybe spring break won’t work, but maybe it will. And if it does, I’d love to come back down soon. So, let me know, okay?”

“We will,” Carly assures him. “We’ve loved having you. Thank you for everything.”

Freddie insists on paying for brunch, which only Carly playfully argues with him about; Sam thinks it’s fine if Freddie wants to pay, why should she try to stop him? And with that, they drive back to Sam and Cat’s apartment so that Freddie can grab his bags and get on the road.

“Well,” Freddie says as he stands next to his car. “Thanks again.”

“Oh, Freddie!” Carly sighs, then gives him a big hug. Sam stands awkwardly, eyes averted, as the two embrace. “We’ll see you soon,” she promises. When they pull apart, Freddie tilts his head at her questioningly, spreading his hands.

Sam rolls her eyes and steps in to hug him. She slaps his back a few times, enough to make him *oof*, then pulls away. “Get out of here,” she tells him as a parting greeting.

Freddie just grins and gets in his car. Sam and Carly stand and watch him drive away.

“Well,” Carly says, “I’d better be going, too.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. They still haven’t looked at each other, they’re still both looking the way Freddie left. There are a million things Sam wants to say, but she can’t say any of them. She wishes she could take back what she said last night, but she also knows there’s a reason she needed to say it. There’s a reason things are so awkward right now, and maybe they need to be.

“Bye, Sam,” Carly says as she begins to walk over to her car.

“Carls,” Sam starts, then stops herself.

She can see in her peripheral vision Carly turning toward her. “Yeah?”

It’s so stupid. There’s nothing to say. There’s no way to fix what’s wrong between them, not with words. All Sam can do is leave it alone and hope it goes away. “Nothing,” she sighs, wincing at the cliché of it all.

Carly doesn’t say anything in response, just turns and gets in her car. Sam doesn’t look toward her until she can see her tail lights driving away.

Sam goes inside the apartment. Cat is gone, off running errands with Nona, but she comes back not long after Sam does. “Hi!” she greets brightly.

“Hey,” Sam answers.

“I hoped I might catch Freddie before he left,” Cat says, even though she’d already said goodbye to Freddie before they’d gone to brunch. She looks around. “Did Carly leave too?”

“Yeah,” Sam answers, keeping her tone even.

“Oh. Okay.” Cat sounds a little disappointed. “Well, what are we doing today?” she asks.

Sam shrugs. “I just kind of want to hang out and enjoy the fact that our apartment is just ours.”

Cat chuckles. “Okay by me,” she agrees.

They do exactly that for the afternoon into the evening. Sam can’t help but think about Carly, think about everything that happened over the past couple of weeks, the high of being so simpatico with her again, the low of realizing that her very heart is betraying someone she



loves so much. When she'd told Cat that she'd always love Carly, she'd meant for it to be a kind of nostalgic love, a love that existed to reify her previous relationship, which had always been shrouded and sometimes felt like a dream. She had never intended for it to be a love that reblooms *now*, in these circumstances in which it's so unwelcome. Her love for Carly is supposed to linger in the past, not complicate her present with Cat, her love for her.

Because she *does* love Cat. She loves Cat immensely. And she doesn't want anything to change, but at the same time, her heart aches, longs for Carly. She hates that things are so broken between them. She hates that it's impossible for them to be around each other without wanting more. But being Carly's best friend had never been what Sam wanted, not really, so maybe it should be no surprise that it's still not what she wants now.

Sam feels like she's acting relatively normal, laughing at all the right parts of the show they're watching, snuggling up to Cat and occasionally kissing her cheek, but something of her mood must show, because after dinner, Cat asks, "Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

Sam pauses, and really looks at Cat for a moment, then finally says, "I will be. How did you know?"

Cat shrugs. "You just seemed...sad."

Sam scoffs, "I'm not sad, I'm just..." It turns out she doesn't know what to say.

Cat just nods knowingly. "Is it because Freddie left?"

"Oh, god, no," Sam says immediately. She takes Cat's hand. "Look, I—I have something to work through, and when I do, I'll tell you about it, okay?"

Cat nods slowly. "You know, I...think I'm in the same boat as you are."

Sam looks at her. She's been so wrapped up in her own shit, she hadn't even noticed that Cat's been dealing with something, too. "You are?"

"Yeah. I'll tell you about it another time."

They look at each other, both aware that the other is holding something back, keeping a secret. It's weird, though, to know that's exactly what's happening, even if neither of them knows the substance of what the other is keeping so close to the vest. Sam wonders if that's a good thing, that they're this honest with each other. Even though it makes her feel a little further away from Cat than before.

She remedies this feeling by holding Cat closer. Cat snuggles her right back.

Sam supposes this will have to do, for now.

The next few days, Cat wonders whether she should mention her crush on Carly.

They haven't seen Carly, or even so much as mentioned her, since Freddie left town. Even the group as a whole has been pretty quiet, recovering from the last few parties they had. But also, the new year seems to be prompting people to be a little responsible. Beck has some upcoming auditions. Tori and Andre are working on selling a song, Jade is working on a short film for her own enjoyment instead of for school. Even she and Sam have gone over to their school campus to buy books and school supplies, even though classes don't start for another couple of weeks.

As for what Carly's been up to, Cat only really knows from social media: her father mailed her her favorite Italian espresso, and she bought a book about the possible scientific basis for the existence of the Sasquatch.

Other than that, Cat doesn't really know.

But she's gotten *very* familiar with Carly's social media over the past week or so. Obviously, she can only really look at it when Sam isn't right next to her or looking over her shoulder. But she has definitely been looking, drinking in the sight of Carly, dwelling on how attractive she is, letting the delightful feelings her crush brings fill her up. When she's by herself, she daydreams about what it might be like to kiss Carly, which makes her feel very guilty, but also very, *very* good, in that shivery way.

It's also making Cat...kind of horny. Which, it's near the new moon, when Sam's libido tends to be a little more subdued, absent an erotic trigger. So Cat is initiating more sex. Sam certainly seems to welcome it, and the moments when they connect in bed seems to allow them to forget about the fact that they both know the other has a secret, that the other is holding onto something they aren't ready to share yet.

The fact that Sam so clearly has a secret would normally drive Cat crazy, but the fact that Cat has one of her own that she isn't ready to share is the only reason she isn't peppering Sam with questions about her own. But Cat's undeniably curious. When she isn't wrapped up in Sam, or in her crush, Cat finds herself wondering what might be going on. More than once, she wonders if Sam has noticed her crush, and is waiting for Cat to say something. That kind of thought makes Cat uncertain of *what* to do, but for now, she just lets things stay the way they are. She loves Sam, and the fact that this is still true becomes more evident every time she thinks about her.

But the fact that she's crushing *hard* on Carly also doesn't seem to be going anywhere.

Finally, though, Sam is the one who says something, several days after their initial conversation.

"Can we talk?" Sam asks her one evening after dinner. Sam had been quiet during the meal, but Cat still hadn't quite expected that she might be ready to talk.

"Of course," Cat replies, and they sit together on the couch. Cat seats herself carefully, grounding herself, preparing for the possibility that Sam might confront her about this crush.

She would be honest about it, of course. She would do everything she could to reassure Sam that she doesn't love her any less and—

"I did something really terrible." Sam's voice is small, heavy with regret, but it's enough to break into Cat's rambling thoughts. "I did the exact thing I was so afraid of."

Cat shifts a little closer on the couch. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't even want to say it, I feel so awful," Sam says in a pained voice.

"I could try to guess," Cat offers. She hopes this might lighten Sam's mood as she suggests, "You ate all the meatballs I froze to make later?"

Sam is quiet for a moment. "Well, yeah," she admits. "But that's not what I'm so upset about."

"I—wait, you ate all the meatballs?" Cat asks, a little incredulous.

"Yes, I'm sorry!" Sam throws her hands up. "But I've done something worse to you than I did to those meatballs," she whispers.

Cat isn't actually *that* mad about the meatballs. It's not like it's out of the ordinary for Sam to eat all of something unexpectedly. So she sets the issue aside and prompts in a gentle voice, "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Sam stares at her feet, clearly not wanting to even look at Cat. Finally, she says, "At Tori's party, I had a moment alone with Carly and...I admitted it."

"What did you admit?" Cat asks, heart thundering. She has a feeling she knows; there's only so many things Sam could be alluding to. But she's also not willing to guess without some confirmation.

"I admitted that I still love her," Sam says harshly, sounding angry. Her voice is coming out harder, faster. "And she said she still feels the same way about me. So, you see. I can't be around Carly anymore. Because it was a mistake to get close to her again. I was only supposed to love the *memory* of her not—not *her*." She shakes her head. "I'm so sorry," she says softly.

"Why are you sorry?" Cat asks. "What did you do?"

Sam finally looks at her, expression baffled and full of self-loathing. "Weren't you listening? I did the thing I *can't* do. I fell in love with Carly again!"

"But what did you *do*?" Cat presses. "Did you kiss her?"

"Of course not!"

"So then what are you sorry for?"

Sam just looks plainly bewildered. “Is there something you’re not understanding about this? I *betrayed* you.”

“I guess the only thing I’m not understanding is why you think that,” Cat replies. Her heart has been pounding during this whole conversation, and she won’t lie and pretend it’s *easy* to hear that Sam is having these feelings, but she keeps thinking about her conversation with Jade, and the notion that just having feelings doesn’t have to mean there’s any less love to go around. “You don’t have to be upset about falling in love.”

“Yes, I do!” Sam buries her fingers in her hair in frustration. “It’s—it’s not right to feel this way about someone else when I’m with you.”

“Do you still love me?” Cat asks, almost afraid of the answer, given the intensity of Sam’s distress.

“Of *course* I do,” Sam says immediately, reaching for Cat’s hands. “That was never in question.”

Cat smiles, relieved. “Good.”

“And I’ll *always* choose you,” Sam reiterates, meeting Cat’s eye with a genuine expression of devotion.

But Cat surprises herself by asking, “Why should you have to choose?”

Sam rears back like she’s been slapped. “What?”

Maybe that came out a little differently than the way Cat intended it. “I just mean...you can’t help the way you feel about Carly. And you know how you feel about me. So maybe it’s okay to have both?”

Sam looks pained. “You’re *okay* with this? You’re okay knowing that I so easily fell back in love with my ex-girlfriend just from spending some time with her again?”

“I think I can be. I think I will be,” Cat replies. “I’ve known for a long time that you might always still love Carly. I don’t think this is so different.”

“Except that she’s here in the same city and still has feelings for me, too,” Sam counters.

Cat shrugs. “That does make it a little scarier. But I don’t think it makes sense to limit love. I don’t think loving one person means you can’t love another.”

Sam is looking at her in awe. “I can’t believe you’re okay with this.”

“Well,” Cat hedges, “I might be more okay with it because I understand how you feel.”

Sam looks blank, apprehensive. “What do you mean?” she asks cautiously.

“I mean that, I know how you feel about Carly because I feel it, too.”

Sam stares at her. “You’re in love with Carly, too?” she asks, her tone suggesting she’s half expecting this to be some kind of joke.

“I mean...I don’t know if I’m ready to put the *love* label on it, but, *god*, I’ve been drowning in this crush on her,” Cat gushes, hand to her chest as if it will help keep all her feelings from just spilling out all over them both.

Sam doesn’t say anything for a long moment, just keeps staring at Cat, then sinks back against the couch. “Wow, that’s...that’s a lot.” But then she sits forward again. “Is that the thing you weren’t ready to tell me the other day?”

“Yeah,” Cat confirms. “I was coming to terms with it. Because I was scared, too,” Cat admits. “But then I realized I didn’t love you any less. And I realized having a crush doesn’t hurt anyone. It doesn’t take anything away from our relationship.” Cat doesn’t want to say how, exactly, she came to this realization. Sam might not be thrilled in this moment to know that their friends knew about Cat’s crush before she did.

“I don’t know how I feel about this,” Sam says. She looks quickly at Cat. “I’m not, like, mad at you or anything. I’m just...processing this.”

“I know,” Cat replies, but the feeling of having her crush out in the open makes her feel so elated she almost can’t bear it. “I just think it could actually be really fun to both like the same person? We could talk about her, and both know exactly what the other one means!” She’s practically buzzing with the energy of feeling like she’s so full of love, there’s nowhere for it to go but *out*. “I don’t think we should have to limit our love! I think if we both love someone else, then it should be okay! The more love we put into the world, the better!” she enthuses.

Sam looks much less enthusiastic. “Yeah, but...*I’m* not happy having these feelings. There’s still too much shit between Carly and me for this to be anything other than devastating.”

“Oh,” Cat subsides. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she says, feeling like she has to physically reign herself back in.

“No, I don’t want you to feel bad if this is fun for you,” Sam says. “I mean, I get what you mean, and in theory, I like it? But I don’t think I could happily really love someone other than you. I’d be afraid you wouldn’t feel special anymore.” Sam takes her hand. “It meant so much to you when I promised to always choose you. So I’m going to make that promise again. I’ll always choose you. Because loving you is more important to me than any other love in the world.”

Cat’s heart swells. She’s undeniably thrilled by Sam’s profession of fidelity, even as she still *wants* to live in a world in which love can be shared so simply, so freely. “I love you,” she sighs.

“I love you, too,” Sam answers, kissing her.

They get lost in their kisses, and it seems, for now, the conversation is tabled.

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After the new year, the next semester of classes seem to sneak up on them quickly.

Jade is the first to go back to school, about two weeks after New Year's. Everyone has been pretty busy, so the whole group hasn't gotten together since New Year's, though people have hung out individually; Sam and Cat had Tori and Jade over a few times, though they never invited Carly, and Tori and Jade never asked why.

Beck decides to throw a final party before Jade's classes start. It's the first time Sam and Carly have been in the same space together since their mutual confession and Sam is... undeniably nervous.

Cat, though, seems positively giddy about the prospect of seeing Carly, though she's also clearly trying to keep it under wraps. It's just that Sam knows her so well that she can see right through it. At least it's cute. While Sam still isn't *thrilled* about the idea of Cat crushing on Carly, she wants Cat to be happy, and this certainly is making her happy.

Which...the whole situation *doesn't* make Sam happy. It hasn't negatively impacted their relationship, but Sam knows she's a little less fun to be around lately because she's been so distraught over this *love* she's been fighting with, the one that bubbled up without her permission, the one that makes her feel guilty and pathetic. Tonight, at least, Cat gets to be excited about something and Sam gets to watch her enjoy herself.

Tori is their designated driver tonight. Sam has a feeling it would've been natural to drive Carly, too, but apparently Robbie had offered to drive her, instead. Sam wonders if he's just going to ask her questions about Freddie the whole time. Robbie may have a boyfriend, but his obsession with Freddie is difficult to ignore.

But as much as Sam worries about this whole situation, about being in the same space as Carly, who still has the power to make her weak, it turns out...fine?

She and Carly really don't interact. At all. Sam had worried that her desire to ignore Carly for her own sanity might lead to hurt feelings, but...Carly isn't trying to approach her at all. She's not even really trying to look at her. And strangely enough, it feels almost...natural. Like, not overly conspicuous that the pair of best friends aren't even interacting. They both just seem like they have other people to talk to, it doesn't even feel like anything is missing.

Cat, of course, shouts, "Carly!" on sight. Carly is the one to offer a hug after Cat seems too flustered to lead with one (which is more conspicuous than *anything* in Sam's opinion, because when does Cat *not* try to hug someone?). But while Cat happily chats with Carly, and so does everyone else, who are also all talking with Sam, too, the palpable distance is muddled, becomes hardly noticeable.

Which doesn't mean it's not on Sam's mind. It is. Especially the more she smokes. But at the end of the evening, when she falls asleep on Tori's couch with her arms wrapped around Cat, Sam realizes she survived a party with Carly and nothing awful happened.

Except that just seeing her across the room was enough to make her chest ache with the sweet agony of love with no release.

Monday, Jade is back at school, and Sam and Cat are facing the reality that they go back to school next week. Cat starts making lists, trying to ensure they each have all the school books and supplies they need. She starts mapping out a schedule for them, for when to drive to school, and what to do if one person is busy on campus when the other isn't. Sam isn't really dreading school the way she used to throughout her whole childhood, but she isn't that excited about it yet, either. She figures once she gets into her classrooms and can start making art, she'll feel better. For now, it just smacks of responsibility, and she wants to sit out all the planning and processing that Cat has to do to make herself ready for school. Something about routines being the key to her academic success. That, and her "special vitamins." Sam has never really pressed her about these things, she just lets Cat do what Cat needs to do.

That afternoon, though, Sam and Tori have plans to go buy some wolfsbane. Sam rides her motorcycle out to Tori's, since she lives close to the shop, but they take Tori's car from there.

"Carly didn't need to buy any wolfsbane?" Sam asks as they set on their way. She's honestly curious if Tori invited Carly, and what Carly said.

"No, uh, Carly said she just went the other day to stock up," Tori answers.

Something in her tone is mildly awkward. Sam decides to ignore it for now.

The full moon is this week, starting the next day, but they'd already decided to take their Shadow Creek Park trip on Thursday, since it's the day that works best with Jade's new school schedule. Especially important, since the sun sets so early in January, for Jade to be able to get off campus in time to drive them there. But, Sam wants to make sure she has some wolfsbane tincture for at least *one* night this week. Full moon sex with Cat is something they both definitely look forward to.

"So, um," Tori starts, and her tone is *definitely* awkward now. "Are we...still on for Thursday?"

Sam narrows her eyes. "Yeah," she says slowly. Tori should know full well how much she looks forward to this. "Why?" she asks plainly.

"I just meant, I wasn't sure if you and Carly were...cool," Tori utters.

"What makes you think that?" Sam asks, too quickly, betraying her own discomfort with the topic at hand.

Tori glances over at her. "Don't worry," she says placatingly, "I don't think anyone else has noticed things are weird with you two. Except Jade. But we know she can keep a secret."

"Who says things are weird?" Sam asks, her voice getting increasingly agitated.

"Well, first of all, the two of you didn't say a *thing* to each other at Beck's party over the weekend," Tori starts, "Which I don't think anybody really thought much of, there was a lot

going on, and everybody was pretty fucked up.” Sam snorts in agreement, but doesn’t comment on the accuracy of Tori’s assessment. “But, um, mostly I just know because...I heard you.”

“What are you talking about,” Sam asks warily.

Tori sighs, and briefly, awkwardly, rubs her face when they’re stopped at a red light. “Sam, I didn’t mean to, but I overheard you and Carly that night at my party,” Tori admits in an apologetic tone.

Sam knows immediately what Tori must mean. But the thought of it is so *embarrassing*, she just—can’t. “What did you hear?” she asks, because she also wants to know how *much* Tori heard. Then, she might know how much of an explanation she needs to offer.

Tori takes a deep breath, then explains, “I heard you say you still loved her, and I heard Carly say she felt the same way.”

Sam sinks back into her seat in Tori’s car. “Okay. Yeah. Okay,” she replies, processing that Tori pretty much heard exactly what was conveyed between them. “But that doesn’t mean I’ve done anything with her. I’m still loyal to Cat,” she adds quickly.

Tori nods. “I know.”

Sam frowns. “How on earth would you *know*?”

Tori shrugs. “Just a sense I get from both of you. And with what I heard, these confessions *rattled* you both. Neither of you were overjoyed.”

“No,” Sam says quietly, turning to look out the window. The knowledge that Tori knows, that Tori *heard* them...well, Sam realizes she should have anticipated it. Tori had been *right there*, only a few feet away, but with her back to them and the sound of Jade and Cat singing karaoke filling the air, Sam had assumed that at the very least, her attention was elsewhere. It’s both humiliating and strangely validating that Tori overheard. “Love isn’t supposed to be this awful,” she comments miserably.

Tori chuckles. “You sound like me, realizing I might have feelings for Jade. Things weren’t always so easy between us.”

Sam side-eyes her. “Yeah, but, you and Jade worked things out. That isn’t an option for Carly and I.”

Tori twists her mouth. “No. I guess not,” she agrees pensively. They’re both quiet for a moment, and then Tori says, “I kinda assumed you might say something when we were planning what night we were going to Shadow Creek Park. But you didn’t. So I guess I’m asking you now. Are we going to be able to do this, all together?”

Sam squints out the window, back to avoiding Tori’s glances. “I guess I hadn’t thought about it. My time with you in the park is important to me and I guess maybe I thought Carly might not come along. But she said she’s coming too?”



“Yeah,” Tori confirms. “She said she wouldn’t miss it. And, Sam, you know I can’t go back to taking you both separately. Especially not now that Jade’s already back in school.”

“I know,” Sam says, defeated. “Maybe I also kind of thought it might be fine? Everything is always so much simpler when we’re wolves.”

“I know what you mean.”

“And maybe,” Sam admits, voice even quieter, “Maybe selfishly...I want to see Carly.”

“I think that makes a lot of sense,” Tori reassures her. She pulls into a parking spot near Earth+, then turns to look at Sam with a serious expression. “Does Cat know?” she asks, though her tone is more concerned than accusatory.

“Yeah.” Sam shakes her head. “That’s a whole different set of problems.”

Tori raises her eyebrows. “I see,” she says, and she doesn’t press Sam. “I think,” Tori says carefully, “That with...things between you right now, being wolves together, with me there, too, might be the safest way you can interact. And I *do* think you should interact. Crushes fester in darkness.”

Sam blinks. “Damn. That’s heavy.”

Tori chuckles briefly. “It’s true. They’re more painful when they’re just kept inside, when they have no form of expression. At least if you and Carly see each other...I dunno. Maybe the reality of everything can help your crushes burn out a little.”

Sam doubts this. Being together is the very reason their feelings returned. But turning into a wolf is one of the least sexy experiences that exists so...maybe it could do them good. “Let’s go get wolfsbane,” Sam says abruptly. “I do have *other* plans this full moon.”

Tori smirks. “You and me both.”

Sam’s plans for her wolfsbane tincture go exactly as she hopes, wild passion and soft affection mingling as she and Cat enjoy each other under the glow of the full moon. One thing Sam will admit, this shared crush on Carly has led to some *great* sex, even if neither of them have said a word about her. Just the newness of her has breathed new life into their erotic interactions. Like a brush with death, reminding them of how good it feels to be alive, a brush with another possibility reminds them both how much they appreciate what they have.

By Thursday, though, Sam is definitely ready to run around. No matter how much wolfsbane sex she has, it can’t truly sate the need to exist as a wolf. At least, she doesn’t think so. She thinks if it could, she and Cat might’ve learned that this weekend, with all the sex they’ve had.

She and Cat ride the motorcycle to Tori’s house, arriving before Carly. Tori and Jade invite them inside, where Sam notices the distinct lack of the smell of something cooking. She’s disappointed; eating before they go change is part of the routine, and besides, Sam doesn’t

want to go to the park hungry. She doesn't want to gross out Tori by hunting something, but she'll probably have to if her stomach is empty. And, also, she's always suspected Carly isn't as fine with her hunting as she'd always claimed, and the selfish part of her...doesn't want Carly to think she's gross either.

Even though it really would be much easier if that could happen.

"You ready for tonight?" Tori asks, a touch of significance in her voice.

Sam glances at Jade, who wears a curious expression, and at Cat, who is also watching her, and throws up her hands. "What's everyone worried about me for? I'm fine. I'll be fine."

"That's good!" Cat says encouragingly.

They'd talked a little about this. Sam had expressed to Cat that she thought it might be good for her and Carly to see each other as wolves, that it might help...settle things between them. She's still not sure she believes that, but she hopes it'll somehow work out. Cat, for her part, had seemed happy that things were going to stay the same with their Shadow Creek Park ritual.

Or, more likely, she's just excited to see Carly. Because moments later, Tori's head lifts. "I think I hear Carly."

Sam nods, having just picked up on the same thing. "Same."

She can see Cat subtly tugging at her skirt, ensuring it's straight, and smoothing her hair with one hand. Sam wants to roll her eyes, but then catches herself tugging at her own t-shirt, and instead, just feels miserable. They're *primping* for her.

This is all so ridiculously pathetic.

Carly knocks, and Tori invites her in. The sight of her is a punch to the gut—dark hair shining in effortless waves, dark eyes alight with eagerness, a cheerful smile on that gorgeous mouth with those luscious, full lips that Sam has kissed until she *aches*...she's aching now, a powerful pang low in her guts, at the desire just the sight of her ignites. Not to mention the *smell*—not just of Carly herself, that familiar, homey smell that fills her with longing, but the smell of *meat*.

Carly holds up a bag from Inside Out Burger. "I brought dinner," she announces.

"Hi, Carly!" Cat bursts out. "You also brought yourself!"

"I did," Carly laughs, a little awkwardly. "How are you, Cat?" She offers her a hug with the arm not holding the bag of food. The *large* bag of food. Even so, Sam hopes it's enough for three (presumably) hungry werewolves and two humans with more normal appetites.

"I'm good," Cat tells Carly's shoulder as they embrace briefly, and Sam hears a slight waver in her voice, probably at the proximity to her crush. It makes her blush, because it seems so *obvious*. *Get a grip, Cat*, she thinks to herself, but with the way she's staring at Carly, she knows she needs to get a grip, too.

“Great. I’m starving.” Sam takes the bag from Carly’s hand, because this is the most normal thing for her to do at the moment. Even if she’s sure everyone in the room knows that *something* is going on with her and Carly...well, normalcy should help, right?

“Hey!” Carly admonishes playfully. “Leave some for the rest of us.”

“What do you take me for, an animal?” Sam asks playfully.

Carly casts a sidelong glance at Tori. “Well...”

“If the pawprint fits,” Tori puts in, which prompts Jade to groan loudly.

“Ugh. That’s terrible,” Sam agrees, pulling out a burger.

As she eats, she wonders if Carly knows that Tori overheard them. That’s probably something she should have asked Tori. Knowing Tori, she either didn’t consider it until this moment, or she learned her lesson and talked to Carly the same way she’d talked to Sam, wanting to stay on even footing in her precarious friendship balanced between them. But there’s no time to worry about that now. They have just enough time to scarf down some food—and gather the rest of it to take on the road—before Jade begins to drive them to the park.

The sun is beginning to set as Jade drives them, setting sky and smog ablaze with color, and when they get out at the park, the air is already chill and crisp against Sam’s skin. She’s eaten, well, not *quite* her fill, but she ate well on the drive, and it feels like her bones and muscles are already humming with anticipation of the change. Man, she *needs* this.

She kisses Cat and then begins to walk toward the trees alongside Tori, with Carly at Tori’s other side. None of them say much, just walk across the dry, scrubby ground, listening to the crunch of it under their feet, casting glances toward the horizon.

Finally, Carly sighs. “Man, I really need tonight.”

“I know what you mean,” Sam replies without second guessing it. If they’re in agreement here, that’s at least something.

“Yeah,” Tori agrees, “One last hurrah before school, I guess. Though you go back sooner than we do, right Sam?”

“Next Monday,” Sam confirms, grimacing a little.

“What classes are you taking?” Tori asks, though Sam can feel Carly’s eyes on her, curious about the answer.

“Art. Art. More art,” Sam answers. “I’ll take as many different art courses as they let me.”

“I’m looking forward to our Introduction to Performance class,” Carly tells Tori.

“Me, too!” Tori gushes. Sam half tunes them out as they talk about their own classes, but it doesn’t last long, because quickly they’ve made it to their little clearing where they prepare for the change.

They begin to change out of their clothes, chatting eagerly about how excited they are for this full moon romp. It still kinda feels like both Sam and Carly are talking to Tori, but not quite each other, even though they're all in the same conversation together. Sam tries to ignore Carly, for the most part. The casual nudity of stripping down to change isn't exactly titillating under most circumstances, but Sam also doesn't need to be reminded of how pale and smooth Carly's skin is, of the way her dark hair contrasts with it so prettily.

She just really, really doesn't need to leer right now, not when it's so inappropriate. And she hates that she's even in the position of worrying she *might* look at Carly in a way that's uncomfortable for everyone, when she knows so well how mundane this form of nudity is. When she'd made fun of Tori for being a prude about this, still occasionally pokes fun at her now.

But luckily, they aren't all standing together nude for long. The change arrives, mercifully quick, and Sam lets herself sink into the transformation, feeling her skin and bone and muscles shift and move, stretch and crack, into new shapes, new functions. Feeling her wolf senses light up like a sudden power surge, crackling with energy and information and sensation. She inhales the scent of her friends, both the two wolf-shaped ones next to her, and Cat and Jade, yards away at the edge of the park. She lets loose a half-yip, half-howl at the pure *joy of being*, and finds herself beginning to lope away as the last few vestiges of her transformation complete themselves.

Carly and Tori are hot on her heels, and they explode from the grove of trees in a tumble of fur, dancing and wrestling with each other, and Sam doesn't even care which wolf she's tackling as their tails wag madly, and they whimper in their throats at the sheer delight at seeing each other. They've *missed* each other, they've missed the way it feels to be a cohesive unit, a trio of wolves too small to qualify as a pack, but full of mutual respect and affection, like any functional family.

But there are Cat and Jade, ready to round them out with their own brand of affection, the ear scratches and the dog toys they'll happily throw for the energetic wolves that they adore. Sam can see the way Cat pets Carly, the way she's clearly so happy to be around her, and she has to suppress a growl. She stops, stiff-legged and confused for a moment, not even entirely certain which aspect is triggering her jealousy. Is it Cat's attention on Carly, or Carly's attention on Cat? Her wolf brain doesn't have time to parse through the intricacies of such a human emotion as jealousy, it can only understand the simpler, cleaner impulse of envy. So Sam playfully snaps her teeth at Carly, urging her into a game of chase as Cat throws a tennis ball, and Carly eagerly turns her attention to Sam, yipping and following after her, the sounds of her eager breaths loud in Sam's ears.

And honestly, it's a great night. Even after Cat and Jade leave, a little while later, and it's just the three wolves remaining, it's as though all awkwardness has melted away with their human skins. She and Carly are playful, and it's as natural for Sam to tackle Carly during a game of chase as it is for her to tackle Tori. In fact, she has to make sure to pay Tori somewhat equal attention, because of how much she's drawn to Carly, and how much of a relief it is to spend time with her, without complicated feelings, with only the simple knowledge that Carly is one of her people, and it's wonderful to be with her.

It's clear, too, that Carly only has eyes for her. Which is another reason Sam keeps trying to make sure they're including Tori in their silliness and their romping. The sting of rejection can hit wolves very hard, because a social loss means vulnerability, a sense that your group won't protect you. Sam doesn't need any of *that* to rear its fanged head in their little group.

But Tori seems fine, and Sam basks in the presence of Carly all night. When they head back to the trees to get some rest, Carly presses her snout into Sam's fur, breathing deeply, and Sam returns the gesture of trust and affection, letting the scent of Carly swirl through her brain and heart, full of love.

Sam curls up in her area of the clearing. It's going to be chilly tonight, and perhaps that's why Carly comes over, a hint of a whine on her breath, and curls up right next to Sam, practically on top of her.

Sam lets out a sigh, half in complaint at the violation of her personal space. But all this seems to do is prompt Tori to join them, pressing as close as she can on Sam's other side. Sam huffs audibly. When did she become everyone's mattress? But ultimately, the presence of her friends is a warm comfort, and she closes her eyes and sleeps beneath the stars with them.

In the morning, though, Sam wakes up just as she begins to change back into a human, and as her fur slips away, so does the comfort of the wolf pile she's currently in, to be replaced by a dark cloud of awkwardness.

Sam begins to shift away from her still-sleeping companions, despite her body's protests, because the morning winter air is *chilly* on her skin, especially now that her skin is so naked, hairless, sad and fleshy. It's bad enough her wolf mind is still present enough to judge her human form, her human condition, as she struggles to make sense of the emotions that are flooding back into her. Regret. Jealousy. A powerful love that wants to consume her, consume everything, leave her and Carly in its ashes. A quieter love, deep and full like a comforting bathtub, that feels like spending the night in the comfort of Cat's arms. Confusion. And just...not knowing her place, anymore.

Carly stirs first, and seems to jerk away from Sam. It's subtle, but noticeable. Sam doesn't know if Carly is feeling all the same things she does, or if she just senses Sam's distress. Tori wakes slowly, mumbling unhappily and trying to push closer to Sam's warmth before she sighs and seems to wake up completely, reluctantly pulling herself away as she gathers her bearings in her human body.

Sam is already pulling on her clothes, teeth chattering, as Tori seems to fully awaken. Carly is groping for her clothes in another corner of the clearing. They're all quiet at first, dressing in the cold morning air. Finally, Tori says in a tentative voice, "So, last night went well..."

Sam finally looks over at Carly, who smiles wistfully. "It did," Carly agrees.

"So are you—are we all...okay?" Tori asks.

Again, Sam and Carly look at each other, but Carly seems to be waiting for an answer, too. Maybe that makes sense. Sam's the one with a girlfriend, Sam's the one with all the reasons

not to rekindle anything with Carly again. Sam's the one who even *said* something first, who started this whole awkward song and dance around each other.

Yeah. This is all Sam's fault.

The least she can do is offer her friends some reprieve. "We're okay," she assures both Carly and Tori. "At least, as wolves we definitely are," she amends. "As people? We'll just take our time."

Carly's eyes drop and she nods, seeming to accept this. Sam looks over at Tori to see she's wearing an encouraging sort of smile.

"Well, good," Tori says hopefully. "I'm glad we at least have this."

"We'll always have this," Sam says. It's dangerously close to a promise, but, it's an almost-promise she's willing to make.

Wolf nights with Carly are too delicious, too important, too *good* for Sam to want to toss them aside.

Maybe that is selfish.

Maybe Cat wouldn't be okay with the kind of closeness she shares with Carly on a wolf night, if she only knew.

Or maybe Cat would just want it for herself.

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Even though she and Jade obviously have a sleepover like this once a month, so much has happened in the last month that it feels like it's been a very long time since the two of them have been able to hang out like this.

Jade has class the next day, so one of the first things they do together is watch a movie, since that's part of Jade's homework. It's a black and white foreign film, which Cat *should* be used to watching since she's seen so many during her time at Hollywood Arts, but she's struggling to pay attention to this one. It's about a sad old man taking a long drive with a pregnant woman and picking up hitchhikers along the way and reminiscing about his life...that's about all that Cat has retained. She just can't get herself to focus on any detail, not when all she can think about is Sam and Carly.

It isn't that Cat is jealous. Not exactly. It's not like she's worried that Sam and Carly are going to *do* anything together. She trusts Sam, and besides, they're together to be wolves, and not much sexual seems to happen in wolf form, at least, that's what Cat gathers from things Sam has told her.

It's just that Cat is positive that whatever they have going on right now must be more interesting than whatever is happening in this movie where she's not even sure what language they're speaking.

Cat wishes she could be with them. Well, kind of. At the park, there's only so much they can all do together before it stops making sense for humans to hang around. It's not like she can run through the desert and sniff things out with them. But she wishes she could be with them, maybe at home. Snuggling with them both as warm, fluffy wolves.

Or maybe she'd rather be with both of them as *humans*, where she could kiss Sam, and then turn around and kiss Carly, and—

It takes her a moment to realize that Jade has paused the film.

"I take it you're not really into Bergman?" Jade asks.

"No, it's fine," Cat assures her. "I like it."

Jade squints at her. "I know I'm a stickler for not talking during movies, but I can also tell when you're not paying attention. We don't have to watch this."

"But you have to for school!"

"Eh," Jade shrugs. "I'll finish it later. But it kinda sucks to be hanging out when it feels like we're not even on the same wavelength."

"I'm sorry," Cat sighs. "Just...thinking about other things."

Jade nods, still watching her keenly. "You wish Freddie was still visiting?" she asks knowingly.

Cat blinks, surprised. "I mean, it was kind of nice when he was here? It was fun to do a bunch of things all together. But he probably left at the right time. Sam might've killed him if he stayed another night on our couch."

Jade grunts, a sound that's both thoughtful and relatively neutral. "But you probably could've convinced her to let him stay longer," she suggests in a probing tone.

"I guess?" Cat replies, a little baffled now. "I wouldn't have asked her to. Even though I liked seeing everybody together so often while he was here, it was time for him to go home."

Jade scrutinizes her. "You...liked having everyone together—*oh*," she utters.

"What?" Cat asks.

"I'm such an idiot." Jade shakes her head. "I don't know how I missed it. It's not Freddie you have a crush on. It's Carly."

Cat gasps, and it's half a squeak, as she covers her mouth with her hand. "How did you know?" she asks, awed. Then, almost immediately afterwards, processes, "You thought I had a crush on *Freddie*?"

"Sure," Jade replies easily. "Freddie is totally your type. You know, when it comes to guys."

“I don’t think I really have a type,” Cat frowns thoughtfully. “I just like who I like.”

“Yeah, but, Freddie is like Robbie, but actually hot,” Jade says bluntly.

“Robbie’s cute!” Cat insists, and tilts her head at Jade. “Are you sure you don’t have a crush on Freddie?” she asks pointedly.

Jade rolls her eyes. “Being able to tell someone is hot is *not* the same thing as a crush. I know *you’re* hot and I don’t have a crush on you.”

Cat is weirdly flattered by the compliment. “Thank you.” But suddenly, she’s curious. “Never?” she asks.

Another eye roll is the only response Jade gives to that question. “I can tell you like Carly,” she starts, “because you, like, definitely give her a lot of attention when she’s around. I figured you two were just becoming friends, which makes sense. You and Sam were friends first, Carly is Sam’s best friend, there’s bound to be some overlap between them that would make you get along. I just didn’t realize the overlap would make you also *like* her, until right now.”

“I don’t think I like her because she’s like Sam,” Cat explains thoughtfully. “She’s *very* different from Sam.”

“Well, sure, but they have similar senses of humor. Case in point, um, the entirety of *iCarly*? And I know you like people who can make you laugh.”

That much is true, and Cat blushes a little at the realization that Jade has noticed something so personal about her, something Cat doesn’t think she’s ever necessarily verbalized. “Yeah,” she agrees quietly. “But it’s... I don’t know.”

Jade looks curious. “What?” she encourages.

“She’s—she’s warm, and friendly. And she’s sweet!”

“You’re right, she’s nothing like Sam at all,” Jade smirks.

“Sam is sweet!” Cat insists.

“Pretty sure she doesn’t want you to ever say that to anyone else,” Jade warns.

Cat ignores Jade, and is back to thinking about Carly. “But Carly is sweet in a different way. She has every reason to hate me, but she doesn’t! And you’re right, she *is* funny. And I like that she brings out a different side of Sam. A sillier side. A weirder side. And I didn’t think Sam could get much weirder! And...she’s *so hot*.”

Jade raises her eyebrows thoughtfully and nods. “Yeah, she’s not bad.”

“Oh, please, you just said you can tell when people are hot!”



“I dunno, maybe it feels a little dangerous to talk about the relative hotness of someone who kind of reminds me a lot of my girlfriend sometimes,” Jade admits.

Cat considers this. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

Jade shrugs. “I guess it’s not that deep. They’re a couple of stupidly optimistic pretty brunettes who are also werewolves who also can sing...” she trails off. “Well, they have more in common than Carly and Sam do, now that I think about it.” She looks back at Cat. “Yet I’m not the one with a crush on Carly. You must be onto something about how it’s her being different from Sam that draws you to her.”

Cat drops her gaze. “It feels wrong to say. Because Sam is just...she’s *so good* for me. And so good *to* me. It feels almost like thinking about someone so different from her this way is like saying...like saying she’s not the best person for me.”

“Maybe she’s—”

“But she *is* the best person for me!” Cat insists, before Jade can finish what she’s saying. “No one else has ever been so *patient* with me! No one else has ever listened to me, or understood me like Sam. No one has ever *loved* me like she does,” she finishes quietly, “And I’ve never loved anybody like I love her.”

Jade hesitates, then says in a measured tone, “What I was going to say is, maybe she’s the best person for you right now, at this stage in your life. And maybe she always will be. But we’re so *young*. We all have so much to learn still, so many ways to grow. Maybe there will be a time in your life where someone else could be really good for you, too. But maybe Sam will still be also! I just mean...I just know...” she seems to falter, a little. “I’ve *heard* that, as you go through life, you meet so many different people who you could be suited to build a life with. And I get it, to an extent. Beck and I probably could have figured out a way to make things work, like if this was the 1950s or something and we didn’t think we could come out. I probably could have been reasonably happy with him. Maybe.”

“You did fight a lot,” Cat points out.

“Okay, bad example. But what I mean is, I love Tori, and I want to be with her forever, but...sometimes I know how little the odds of that happening actually *are*. And it makes me feel a *little* better to remember there are always other potential partners out there who I could be very happy with even though I *can’t imagine* wanting any of them. Not now, not while I’m so happy with Tori.”

“I get that,” Cat says quietly. “But when I think about how I feel about Carly, I’m not thinking of the long-term. I’m just thinking of...short term stuff.”

“You want to bang her, you mean,” Jade says bluntly.

Cat blushes. “It’s more than that.” She looks away. “I want to love her. I do. But not if it costs me Sam.”

“Yeah,” Jade says heavily. “And if Sam was on board, I wouldn’t know the first thing to tell you about how to do any kind of open thing,” she states.

Cat considers Jade, then, remembering Sam telling her about Tori having overheard what she and Carly said to each other at the party, remembering that both Tori and Jade know about this unwelcome and painful love that hangs between Sam and Carly. It was something that came up in between all the sex they’d had all weekend...all the *great* sex, and Cat hadn’t processed it much at the time, and was mostly just happy that it meant Sam had someone she could talk to who wasn’t all crushed out on the same person she was struggling with loving. And now...Jade knows about Cat’s crush, too. But Cat wants to be certain Sam is right about what she told Cat. Cat has a reputation for spoiling secrets, and this isn’t one she wants to spill accidentally. “You know about Sam and Carly, right?”

Jade looks at her keenly. “You mean their forbidden not-so-secret love? Yeah, I heard.” Her expression shifts into something more curious, with a hint of mischief. “I hadn’t really thought about the two of you both having feelings for her until now. Mostly because I thought you liked Freddie.” Cat shakes her head. “So, what’s *that* like?”

“What’s what like?”

“Both being into the same girl. Honestly, it sounds like it could be kinda fun. You know, minus the awkward part.”

“It might be more fun if I didn’t know Carly loved Sam back, and if Sam didn’t feel so awful about loving her to begin with,” Cat explains.

Jade nods. “So it’s mostly just awkward. Huh.”

“What?”

Jade tilts her head thoughtfully. “The forbidden love thing is supposed to be really *exciting*. I guess it’s just kind of surprising that Sam isn’t enjoying it more.”

“We don’t talk about it much,” Cat admits. Though she thinks she understands what Jade means, because *she* certainly understands the excitement of something so...wrong. “Though, I *think* about Carly a lot, so I’m sure Sam does, too. But we’re still very much into each other, too.”

“Ah,” Jade sits back, looking satisfied. “So, you have good sex while you both think about her.”

“I don’t think about her during sex!” Cat insists. “I stay with Sam. But...maybe...*before*.” That’s all she can manage before embarrassment gets the better of her.

“Hey, you can’t argue with results,” Jade says easily. “I’m happy that part’s working out for you both.”

“Me, too. But I guess I just don’t know what we’re going to do with any of it.”

“I guess if it were me, I’d just wait for the crush to burn out. Seems like you two haven’t been seeing that much of Carly, except for parties and full moons. Maybe you’ll lose interest over time. And maybe all that great sex you’ve been having might help you get over it, too.”

“Maybe,” Cat murmurs, though she doubts it will be that easy. Being away from Carly has only made Cat crave her more, has made her linger on her social media accounts, just to drink in pictures of her smile.

It’s only led her to fantasize while she’s alone, and even, she realizes with the heat of shame on her face, to start fantasizing *right here* next to Jade, when she got bored of the movie.

If this weekend with Sam didn’t...fuck the crush right out of Cat (and she can’t think of a better word for it), Cat thinks this one might linger for a while.

“Is this gonna get easier?” Cat asks, feeling a tinge of despair at the idea that she may always have this craving, always have this longing for someone she can never be with. The feelings her crush has produced in her have been so exciting and pleasurable so far, but she’s starting to understand a little more of Sam’s anguish, of the futility of feeling so deeply for someone with no chance of any meaningful reciprocation. It’s sad, when Cat really thinks about it. It’s painful to feel so foolish with her heart.

“How should I know?” Jade replies archly, refusing to give Cat the reassurance she craves. “But, I mean, it’s probably not going to get harder. Crushes don’t last forever. And if it stops being fun, stop feeding the crush. No contact for a while. But, I’ll say again. Your feelings don’t matter as much as the promises you and Sam make each other. And if those promises don’t work, you can always change the rules.”

The thought of it makes Cat shiver, because all she can think about is Sam’s promise to always choose her. She never wants that promise to change. “Yeah,” she says quickly, now eager to move away from the topic. “We should finish this movie.”

Jade searches her face. “You sure?”

“Yeah! The old guy is going to his childhood home, right?”

“Maybe you were paying more attention than I thought.” Jade looks pleased. “Let me grab us more popcorn, and we’ll finish this movie.”

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Mostly, Carly just regrets the fact that she and Sam have made things weird for everyone else.

Tori had been honest with her, not long before the full moon, and had let Carly know that she had overheard what she and Sam had said to each other at the party. Carly’s first instinct had been to apologize. She couldn’t really explain why. It just felt like they’d done something wrong, letting Tori overhear something so foolhardy.

But, Tori had explained that Sam knew that she knew, and that Sam still wanted to spend the full moon all together, and she hoped Carly still did, too. Tori thought it was fair that they were all on the same page about who knew, and let Carly know that she, Jade and Cat all knew.

Which, Cat...

Carly worries that this whole thing has affected her burgeoning friendship with Cat. She'd been starting to feel like the two of them might have a real friendship, before she and Sam went and screwed everything up by opening their mouths. But now, knowing that Cat knows, too, Carly can understand why Cat has been acting so differently around her since that party. She's overcompensating, trying hard to make it seem like everything is okay between them, when Carly knows it can't possibly be. She'd been lucky enough to have Cat accept her despite her past with Sam, but this—this mutual, undesired, impossible to satisfy love between herself and Sam—this isn't something someone can just *forgive*.

Cat is putting on a brave face to keep the peace. Carly supposes she can appreciate the effort, but deep down, she knows their friendship is unsalvageable.

Just like her friendship with Sam.

Maybe it's good that school is starting in a week and a half. Honestly, Carly is ready. She's tired of sitting around her boring, too small apartment and pining over Sam.

Granted, it hasn't been only that. The first few weeks after New Years had been busy for everyone except, it seemed, her, and that had felt extremely isolating. She'd ended up going deep into Bigfoot rabbit holes online just to focus on something other than her own depressing state of mind. But she saw Tori and Jade a few times, got lunch with Andre once, and even accompanied Robbie to buy a new fragrance; Robbie claimed that he couldn't trust Beck to be impartial about his choice and wanted an opinion from someone he respected. While it was nice for Carly to feel like Robbie regarded her so highly, she'd kind of assumed he'd asked her to come with him as an excuse to talk about Freddie, who he pretty obviously had some kind of a crush on. But to her surprise, Freddie didn't come up once, except for on the drive home, when Carly herself cracked a little under the weight of her own expectations for their trip and briefly brought up Freddie herself.

But now that it's the last week of break, and everyone else is back at school, Carly has been hanging out a lot with Tori and Andre. They mostly go for sushi, or to Paramesium Records, or Andre always seems to know where they can go listen to live music without having to spend much. It's fun; now that Carly has decided she and Andre are better off as friends rather than dating, a lot of the tentativeness between them is gone, and, of course, she and Tori are close, maybe even closer than Tori and Andre, though the two of them still call each other best friends. Carly understands that, though. The title is symbolic sometimes, of a historical connection, one that holds a special meaning. Sam is still Carly's best friend, after all. That's not a title she's prepared to let go of, despite everything that's happened between them. Andre might not know Tori's biggest secret, but to Tori, that clearly doesn't matter, because their connection is based on other things. Music is a big connecting point, Carly guesses, and, clearly, mutual respect and affection.

Their hangouts are nice and normal. Fun. It's a respite from the awkward encounters with Sam, at parties or under the full moon. Carly appreciates it, but when she heads back to her apartment at night, she feels like all she's left with are thoughts of Sam. Memories of the aching sweetness of her kisses, of her tentative touches, gentle though her hands were always so hard-knuckled and rough. The fierce, bright sensation of love and gratitude that welled up in Carly every time Sam stood up to protect her, to fight for her.

Carly is much better at fighting her own battles, now, but she wonders if Sam would still stand up to protect her today. Even out of habit, or a sense of justice, not even out of love. Carly honestly has no idea.

Thankfully, when school starts, Carly has other things to do with her evenings rather than angst over Sam and indulge in orgasms that just leave her feeling bleak. Well, okay, she's still having a lot of orgasms, but at least afterwards she can turn to homework instead of trying and failing to distract herself with bad TV. School keeps her busy, and busy is the best state of mind for her right now.

She's just getting into the swing of things with the first few weeks of school when the next full moon approaches. And the middle full moon night falls, Carly realizes with a pang, right on Valentine's Day.

Tori and Jade definitely have plans for Valentine's Day itself (gee, wolfsbane on Valentine's Day, Carly can't *possibly* imagine what they have planned), and she assumes Sam and Cat do, too. The only real question is whether they want to go to Shadow Creek Park the day before Valentine's Day or the day after.

Carly suggests the day before to Tori, figuring it might be easier to see the couples when they're still in the anticipatory stage of their date nights rather in the snoodly post-sexytime stage in which Carly would find herself the only one who *hadn't* spent the previous night getting banged. Of course, she hadn't explained that reasoning to Tori, and Tori reported that Sam suggested the night after Valentine's Day, leaving Tori to be the tie-breaker. Tori had sided with Sam, both because the day after Valentine's Day was a Saturday and therefore not a school night, and because she wants to be well-rested for Valentine's Day itself. Carly can't really blame her. She just steels herself to be the fifth wheel in the presence of her friends, something that she is mostly used to, but that's harder to deal with these days.

But that week, Andre turns to her at the end of their World History class; they'd both chosen to take the second level of World History together this semester. He shoots her a smile and asks casually, "Plans for Valentine's Day?"

Carly blinks a little in surprise, but answers truthfully, "Um, not especially."

"Huh. That doesn't seem right," Andre replies, good-naturedly disappointed on her behalf.

His attitude makes her smile a little, but she doesn't feel like talking about why she has no plans. She'd received some attention from guys in her classes, though no one had asked her out directly yet. Probably because she's mostly just deflected their attention, knowing she's in no condition to date right now, now when her heart is torn and bound up with someone else,

someone she absolutely can't have. So instead, she just asks Andre, "Why? What about you?"

"Well, let's just say mine fell through," Andre answers, mouth twisting a little.

"Ouch." Carly winces. "Sorry to hear that."

"It's okay," Andre waves a hand as if literally brushing the negativity aside. "I had been seeing this girl, but...let's just say it's probably a good thing we didn't last as long as Valentine's Day."

"Oh." Carly raises her eyebrows, not sure exactly what that means, but she can make a few guesses.

"So, do you wanna go get dinner and see a concert? I've got reservations at Nozu and tickets to see St. Vincent."

Carly balks a little, "Oh, I, um—"

"Hey," Andre says softly, "No hard feelings if you don't want to. But just so you know, I'm asking you as a friend. I think we both know romance isn't in the cards for us, yeah?"

But Carly has just one more question. "Did Tori put you up to this?"

It's Andre's turn to look surprised. "What? No. Tori doesn't try to tell me who to ask out. Mostly because she knows I won't listen. Not that I'm asking you out!" he adds quickly. "Just as friends," he confirms.

And honestly...hanging out with Andre sounds like a much better way to spend Valentine's Day than being sad and alone. Carly has had enough of that lately. "I'd love to hang out Friday night," Carly tells him.

"Great!" Andre grins. "I'll pick you up at your place around four-thirty? Had to get a dinner reservation on the early side."

"Sounds great to me," Carly agrees enthusiastically. She really does appreciate Andre's offer. She still kinda worries it's a "pity date" more than anything, but Andre seems genuinely interested in hanging out.

Friday arrives. Carly had spent the previous night on wolfsbane, finishing her homework, hoping it would serve as a distraction more than anything. It had kind of worked. She didn't have a whole lot of homework to do for her Friday classes, so she'd worked ahead, as much as she had been able to focus on it.

This makes Friday her second night on wolfsbane, which Carly doesn't expect to be an issue. Hell, she's gone three nights on wolfsbane when circumstances required it. It isn't always ideal, but it's doable, and these two nights should be no issue at all.

Andre picks her up when the afternoon sun is still well above the horizon. Carly had dressed up a little for their outing, not wanting to look unkempt when scrutinized by strangers, who

would assume she was out on a date with Andre. But she also didn't go *too* fancy. Still, she notices the way Andre's eyes run appreciatively over her outfit when he comes to pick her up. But Carly is doing much the same thing to him. Apparently, he'd had something of the same impulse, because though Andre is always well-groomed, there's an extra element of presentation to his look tonight, without making this a full-on suit and tie kind of occasion.

"You look great," he tells her genially. It doesn't feel at all like a come-on, but Carly feels warm from it anyhow.

"So do you," she agrees, meaning it.

He smiles, an easy and friendly grin, and makes a welcoming gesture with his arm. Carly locks up her apartment and follows him out to his car. He drives an older Chevrolet sedan, and though there otherwise aren't a lot of bells and whistles on the car's dashboard, Andre does have a decent stereo system installed. They're able to spend a lot of the drive to Nozu listening to music while Andre navigates freeways and surface streets clogged with cars. But Andre had apparently accounted for traffic with his plan for the evening, because they arrive even a little early for their reservation.

By now, Carly has been to Nozu enough times to know what she wants to order, so the two of them quickly have no menus between them as they begin chatting. And...keep chatting. Andre is funny and has a lot of great stories about his grandmother, his friends, his music, but more than that, he's a good listener. Carly tells him a lot about her time in Italy, what it was like being raised by her brother Spencer, how different it feels being truly on her own for the first time in Los Angeles. She's touched on some of this with him before, back during the few times they tried to actually date, but now that the pressure is off, and they know each other better, Carly is able to dig a little deeper with some of this, to be a little more honest and vulnerable with her friend, who listens raptly, asking questions and sympathizing with parts of her story.

They get so wrapped up in talking that it takes them a while to finish their sushi, to the point that they both start to realize that the server is trying to usher them out, no doubt needing to fill their table with more Valentine's Day couples trying to have a special evening. It's almost funny, Carly thinks, because this *isn't* a special evening for them, just a nice evening between friends, and here they are taking their time just because they enjoy each others' company.

The server tries to give the check to Andre, but Carly insists on paying, because "You got the concert tickets."

Andre acquiesces, commenting, "And that's how we know it's not a date, because if it were, I wouldn't give in so easily."

But speaking of the concert, they still have some time to kill before it starts, so they stroll down to the Licking Spoon ice cream parlor for some dessert, which Andre does pay for this time. They take the long way back to the car to give themselves time to finish their ice cream and conversation. It's starting to cool down outside, now that the sun has set, and the chill of the air plus the ice cream makes Carly shiver a little. In the car, Andre turns on the heat, and Carly is grateful.

She's feeling just a little bit...scattered. Like maybe it wasn't such a good idea to take wolfsbane tonight, after all. It doesn't make sense, it should be fine. But maybe the wolf inside her is just petulant at having been caged up last night just so she could do homework she really didn't need to work ahead on, and is clawing to get out. Either way, Carly feels just a bit *energized* in a way she can't quite attribute to anything but the moon overhead, and a part of her that longs to be expressed.

This time, Andre turns the music down and they talk as he takes a meandering route through Los Angeles to get to the concert venue. Carly feels like she's talking a lot, but maybe that's also because Andre is focusing on the road. Either way, he doesn't seem to mind.

The concert hall is full, and their seats aren't terrific, but the show is incredible, and Carly feels herself getting swept up in the music, and can see Andre next to her, his eyes alight with joy at the experience. He *loves* this, he *lives* for live music, and his enthusiasm is infectious, and Carly feels full with an alien sort of euphoria, one that doesn't quite belong to her.

"That was incredible!" Carly gushes as they head back to the car after the concert.

"It was, wasn't it?" Andre agrees emphatically. "Man, she can really put on a show!"

"She's *wonderful*!"

"I'll say! I'm glad I snagged these tickets when I did. And thanks for coming with me."

"Thanks for inviting me!"

It all feels so natural, this dynamic between them, as Andre begins to drive her home. Carly considers him, as they chat; Andre isn't playing any music in the car now, explaining he's still *feeling* the music they just experienced. They're comfortable together now, not awkward like when they tried to date. It's good, it's fun. She's grateful for his friendship.

Which is why she can't quite explain it, even to herself, when she goes for a kiss after he parks in front of her apartment.

Andre seems completely shocked. "Whoa, hey," he says, pulling away. "I thought we...I thought we weren't like that."

"Does it matter?" Carly asks him, boldly surprising even herself. She doesn't wait for his reply as she kisses him again.

He's kissing her back, sort of. It's tentative. It's reluctant. Carly pushes for more but it isn't even really *about* Andre. It's about *her*, and wanting to *feel* something, wanting to maybe feel like she's worth the attention, worth the affection, that she doesn't have to *be* the person people hate to love, that her love doesn't have to be an inconvenience, a curse. And maybe, just maybe, she doesn't have to be the one person tomorrow night who *didn't* spend tonight getting fucked...

But Andre pulls away again, more gently this time, more intentionally, not out of shock. "I'm sorry," he says quietly, "You're *gorgeous*. But I'm not sure we—oh fuck."



Carly's crying. And she's immediately *humiliated*, because it's not even really about his rejection, it's not about *him*. None of this is. Carly is crying because she's in love with Sam and she knows that she's the furthest thing from Sam's mind tonight. She's crying because this love *isn't* unrequited, it's worse than that, it's mutual and dreaded, one they can both only bear to tamp down, because any sort of expression of it is anathema. And she's crying because the purported reason for all of this—discounting Sam's obvious conflicted feelings about the love to begin with—is Cat, who is nothing but sweet and charming and lovely and Carly can't even satisfy her frustration by hating her, because she *doesn't*.

Instead, she tries to pour all of her feelings into Andre, yet another unwilling target, but a target who at least has the compassion and decency to hold her as she sobs forlornly on his shoulder.

It feels so stupid, to cry this hard over someone she should've gotten over *years* ago, but the loss of Sam feels as fresh as ever, in light of the romantic holiday they'd never really had a chance to explore together, not in any real, public way, where friends would *know* what they mean to each other. Instead, some friends know about a love more accurately described as a predicament rather than a relationship, and brace themselves for a storm to brew between them or peter out, meanwhile only pitying them for the position they find themselves in.

Andre has no idea, however, why Carly is crying. "I'm really sorry," he finally says, squeezing her shoulder comfortingly as he continues holding her. "I, uh, I guess I just thought we agreed that we weren't into each other like that and I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"I'm not—" Carly manages through her sobs, "I'm not crying over you."

Andre is quiet for a long moment, then says, "Oh," in a tone that sounds both relieved and a little stung. "Sorry, I just...assumed."

"It's okay," Carly says quietly, more as a standard reply to his apology than any sort of actual comfort, both because he doesn't actually seem to need it and because Carly isn't in any position to offer any.

He's still just holding her, though. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asks, sounding uncertain.

Carly doesn't even know where to start, and her tears redouble for a moment. Finally, she just says, "I'm just so tired of being...alone."

He hums, like he understands this. And maybe he does, a little. He's just heard her talk for a lot of the evening about how difficult it's been to move to Los Angeles, without her normal support system. She didn't discuss Sam much, but she had to offer *some* explanation for why her best friend hasn't been the source of stability she's hoped for, and merely said their separate colleges and Sam being busy with Cat has meant they don't see each other as much when classes are in session, which Andre seemed to accept. All in all, Carly's loneliness doesn't seem surprising to Andre, and finally, tentatively, he suggests, "Have you tried any of the apps?"

Carly is surprised enough that she sits up, wiping at her face. "What?"

Andre fishes out a little packet of tissues from the pocket in his driver's side door and passes them to Carly, who uses one to wipe at her face and blow her nose, even more embarrassed by how disgusting she must look. Even if she were a pretty crier normally, *no one* is at this level of tears and mucus. "I just mean, if you're lonely, you can try Kindling or, I dunno, there must be apps for girls looking for girls. I've met a lot of great girls on Kindling."

"O-oh, you mean, like, if I were looking to date?" Carly feels like she's behind on this conversation somehow. Maybe because she's wasted so much brain power feeling sorry for herself.

"It's just a suggestion," Andre shrugs. He gestures at her. "I mean, look at you! I don't think you'd have any trouble finding company if you wanted to put yourself out there. Not that you have to. But, like, listen. You're hot! If I were any good at the whole friends with benefits thing, I'd be so down! But I'm not that guy." Andre's expression turns uncomfortable, uncertain. "Aaand, I'm realizing maybe that my complete separation of friendship and romance might not be a great trait for me, but you know what? It is what it is right now." He faces her more squarely again. "Look, I know you said this isn't about me, and I get that. But I *am* flattered. And I think a lot of other people would be, too. I'm just saying, you don't have to choose loneliness to be independent."

It's good advice, generally. Except for one thing. "What if I'm already in love with someone and they just...can't?" Quickly, she adds. "It's not you."

"Well, I kinda figured that," Andre mumbles, then lets out a breath. "Whew, that's...that's rough. I dunno, maybe I'm just callous. But when I get hurt, I always just make the decision to move on. And when I tell myself it's time to heal, I do." He shakes his head. "Or maybe I'm just really good at repression, I dunno," he laughs.

Carly laughs, too. "I wish it were so easy."

"Me, too. For your sake." Andre smiles at her, and it's the kind of smile that could make a different girl fall in love with him. "I'm sorry you're hurting."

"Thanks," Carly sighs, looking away, feeling silly.

"I had a really good time tonight, though."

At this, Carly feels herself start to smile. "I did, too. Really, thank you so much for tonight."

"Hey, any time," Andre says easily. "I mean that. You feel lonely, you call me, okay?"

"Okay," Carly agrees, knowing that she's more likely to want to lay low after being *this* vulnerable in front of him. "Thanks," she tells him.

"Text me when you get inside," Andre requests, since he can't see her apartment door from the car.

"I will," Carly says, and exits the car quickly, wanting to be alone.

It's funny, to want to be alone, when it's her whole problem.



## #SerpentSoftness

Valentine's Day is...incredible.

As with last year, Cat jokes that they have to do what she wants on Valentine's Day because it's "My day," but luckily, what Cat has in mind pretty much perfectly aligns with what Sam wants to do: sex and food. So, pretty much what they'd done for their anniversary two weekends ago, though neither of them would ever complain.

Sam had spent the previous night as a wolf, both so they could have some time together with her in wolf form, and because it sort of necessitated them delaying any sex until Valentine's Day itself. With classes and homework, they haven't had a chance to be intimate since the last weekend, and Sam's transformation simply extends the delay one more day. Because at this point, taking wolfsbane is almost an aphrodisiac in itself for Sam, since the general expectation is that the deliciously gratifying full moon sex will absolutely happen at some point if she takes it. Even if there are other reasons to take it, like homework or some kind of social event, there's always energy for bedtime sex when it comes to wolfsbane.

But Valentine's Day...starts with a bang, and goes from there.

In fact, Sam wakes up to Cat as the big spoon subtly grinding on her, fingers slipping beneath the hem of the sleep shirt Sam threw on early that morning when she'd changed back to a human to caress her skin. Cat whispers that she needs Sam to get up and go brush her teeth and that then they can start their morning with some fun.

Sam has never brushed her teeth so quickly in her life. Too quickly, even, because Cat gives her a pointed look when she walks back out of the bathroom too fast, and Sam groans and heads back inside to do a more thorough job.

But once her mouth is clean, Sam easily takes the upper hand, and practically pounces on Cat back in their bed, the two of them groaning into each others' mouths as a morning greeting. The sex is rough, though a little awkward at times because Sam is still waking up, and hasn't had any coffee yet, but it's clearly enjoyed by them both, judging by the sounds Cat makes between the laughter they both emit to dispel their less graceful moments.

After their morning sex, Cat makes them a big, hearty breakfast, both for Sam's lycanthropy and because of the energetic sex they just had.

Cat gives Sam some time after breakfast to lounge on the couch and drink coffee, but soon declares that they're going to take a walk along the beach. Sam's automatic groan is cut short by Cat's prim reminder that it's her day, and Sam clamps her jaw shut and goes to put her shoes on.

It's a pleasant day outside; the ocean air has a mild chill, but not so much that Sam isn't comfortable in her hoodie with the sleeves pushed up to her elbows. Cat wears a cardigan over her dress, and Sam finds herself staring at Cat's legs whenever she trots ahead, dancing in the sand, seeming to revel in the pure joy of being alive.

Or maybe the pure joy that morning orgasms can bring. Sam sure knows she's still feeling *that*.

And maybe...thinking about those morning orgasms...has her wanting more.

"Wish this wasn't a public beach," Sam mutters idly.

"Why?" Cat asks, head tilting curiously as she walks backwards in front of Sam.

"Because if we were somewhere private, I'd be laying you down in the sand to totally have beach sex with you right now."

Cat fights a grin, and Sam can see her cheeks glow pink. "And I'd decline," she says politely.

Sam blinks, surprised. "Really? I thought you'd be so totally into the romance of that." She considers her words, and grimaces. "Okay, maybe I could've said like...I'd make love to you in front of the ocean." She dips her voice into a lower growl.

She can see Cat's tongue wet her lips, but she says. "It's not because you didn't say it sexy enough. It's because it's *sand*, Sam. I think it would get into places I'd rather not have it."

"Oh." Sam thinks about how she's always pouring sand out of her boots when they come back from the beach, and never even understands how it gets *in* there. How Cat makes them take their shoes off outside, because she hates trying to clean up sand inside the apartment because it's an endless task. "Yeah, okay. Say no to sand sex. That sounds awful."

"Now *kissing* on the beach," Cat drawls, and tugs Sam closer.

They kiss near the surf, beneath the warm sun, smelling the salt of the ocean and the sand... and the people and the weed and the asphalt and the car exhaust.

But with enough of Cat's kisses, everything else melts away, and it's just the two of them, Sam tasting the sweetness of her lips, the artificial cherry flavor of her lip gloss, and feeling the softness of Cat's flesh beneath Sam's hands as they rest on her hips.

"Kissing on the beach is nice," Sam mumbles when they pull apart.

Cat laughs softly, an alluring sound. "That's why I wanted to do it with you."

Sam grins, and the two of them begin walking hand in hand along the beach. Cat turns them around, heading back toward home, where they take their shoes off on the back patio and try to dump out all the sand. "I need a shower," Sam comments. She usually takes one in the morning, but hadn't gotten around to it yet today.

"Okay," Cat chirps. "You go shower, and I'll start thinking about lunch."

Except that by "thinking about lunch," Cat apparently means...joining Sam in the shower.

Shower sex isn't exactly common for them. It's not like the shower is an unsexy place; shower sex *sounds* hella hot, and Sam has masturbated in the shower countless times, though

that's usually more for logistical reasons than because the shower itself is arousing—for a long time it was one of the few places she knew she wouldn't be interrupted.

But she's being interrupted by Cat now, and it's nothing but welcome.

"H-hey," she stammers as Cat steps into the shower with her, nude. And finds she can't come up with anything else to say.

"I thought I'd join you if that's okay with you," Cat says casually. "Since I need to shower, too."

"That's fine," Sam manages.

At first, it seems like showering together is literally all Cat has in mind. She even helps soap Sam up, which makes Sam's breath catch, wondering if any of Cat's touches all over her skin are about to turn erotic, but instead Cat just draws away and begins to wash herself, leaving Sam to swallow the eagerness in her throat and rinse herself off.

But just as Sam is just about to finish with her shower, she feels Cat's arms wrap around her, feels one hand begin to slide down her body while the other cups a breast.

"Where do you think you're going?" Cat purrs in her ear.

"Nowhere," Sam gasps, "Stayin' right here."

"Good," Cat whispers, and begins touching Sam.

Maybe it's not as romantic as sex on the beach, but it's certainly more hygienic. And Sam certainly isn't complaining as Cat continues to hold her until she's arching back against Cat's body as she comes.

Nor does Cat have any complaint about the way Sam pins her up against the wall and they press together, slick skin on skin, and she grinds against Cat, feet only slipping a few times with her movements, until Cat, too, comes.

When they're out of the shower, Sam gets redressed in the bedroom while Cat takes her time in the bathroom with her hair and makeup. Sam ends up out front watching TV, and realizes that she can't smell anything cooking. Which is why the first thing she asks Cat when she comes out from the back of the apartment is, "What's for lunch?"

Cat laughs. "Okay, I'll admit I got a little distracted. I'll start lunch now. But, I have a favor to ask."

Sam raises her eyebrows. "I'm listening." With the way today is going, she thinks she'd do *anything* for Cat.

At this, Cat is silent for a long moment. Sam scrutinizes her, taking in the deep flush of her cheeks, smelling her anxiety, uncertainty. She's half-risen from the couch to go to her when Cat puts a hand out, indicating she wants space, and Sam reluctantly lowers herself back onto the couch.

“What is it?” Sam finally prompts, keeping her voice soft. She’s honestly starting to worry what it is Cat might want, with how reluctant she is to *say* it. Have all the orgasms been about buttering Sam up for something difficult?

Cat emits a nervous giggle, just once, then seems to draw on her actor training and her features smooth over into something more composed. “I’ve been thinking about...trying something new.”

“Something new,” Sam repeats evenly, hoping that this will help it make sense, or at least signal to Cat that she doesn’t understand.

Cat looks away bashfully, and Sam starts to get an inkling of understanding. Finally, Cat says, “I’m going to send you an email with what I’m thinking about. And if you want to get something to go with it so that you can wear it...” Cat taps on her phone a few times, then glances up at Sam expectantly.

Sam’s heart is hammering as she whips her phone out and stares at the email app, waiting for it to notify her of a new email. It feels like an eternity before her PearPhone buzzes and an email notification appears, and Sam taps to open it as fast as possible.

It’s an email from Cat with no subject, containing only a link. Sam taps on that, too.

The link is to the website for the Pleasure Chest, a local sex toy store, and the image that pops up is for a bright pastel multicolored dildo. Shaped like a unicorn horn. Of course.

Sam looks up at Cat. Even though she’d had a sense of what might be coming, she’s putting the pieces of Cat’s request together. “You—you want this, you want me to *wear* it?”

Cat bites her lip. “I know it’s not really your style but...I *like* it.”

“I—no, I’m not complaining...uh...okay. Shit, okay. Um, how much money do we have in the pineapple?”

“I think we have enough. For you to get it and...something to go with it.”

“Fuck, you want me to go buy a strap-on.” Sam finally just has to say it out loud, because voicing it makes it feel real.

Cat’s face blushes darkly again. “Mmhmm,” she manages in a high-pitched voice. “So if you go do that, I’ll work on lunch.”

Yeah, Sam would do *anything* for this woman, and this isn’t even a difficult ask, because now that the idea is firmly in her head, Sam can’t *wait* to make love to her girlfriend while wearing a unicorn horn dildo.

God, who even is she? But really, who even cares? Sam is in love and absolutely *dying* to try something new.

She flashes, just briefly, onto a conversation she and Carly had about this very thing what feels like ages ago...and sets it aside.

She's not going to let that heartache ruin Cat's day.

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Cat wishes it *still* wasn't so hard to actually talk about what she wants.

But Jade's advice to write it out still helps. Even if Cat didn't so much write anything as send Sam a link. It got the message across, and Cat only had to talk around her actual desire.

Sam has found ways in the past to ask if Cat is satisfied with what they do together, and Cat had always just said that she was, both because it was true and because it was the easiest response. Sam had tried to phrase the questions so it would be easy for Cat to answer if she was interested in something more, but at the time, Cat hadn't been certain she *wanted* anything to change. She still remembers clearly how it felt the first time she'd finally gone down on Sam, how it felt like she didn't have anything more to offer Sam. They'd reached a happy stasis, both clearly satisfied by the sex they had, and a part of Cat worried that introducing something new would awaken those same old fears, despite knowing that Sam certainly hasn't gotten tired of having sex with her.

But something had changed. She'd begun to fantasize more about a new kind of intimacy. Especially the idea that they could have sex face to face, with both hands free. Like the way they often would grind together, but with additional sensation.

And maybe the situation with Carly contributes to this as well. Though she hasn't seen Carly in almost a month, since the last full moon, her thoughts have remained full of her, and she assumes Sam's have, too. Because of that, Cat wants to ensure that things between them are *still* exciting, but also, maybe...it's a new outlet for fantasies about Carly as well.

The fantasies are jumbled; sometimes it's Sam wearing the strap-on for Carly, sometimes it's Carly wearing it for Cat, sometimes it's any combination with Cat either participating or watching, but the idea of that strap-on has solidly taken root, and Cat can't wait to try it out with Sam.

And besides, even if Cat knows in theory that fantasy is fine and healthy, she's hoping that actually enacting her fantasy with Sam will help her stay focused on her girlfriend and not continue to be distracted by her crush.

While Sam is gone, Cat starts on lunch. Even though she'd kept telling Sam she was "thinking about" lunch, she had a clear idea already of what to make. She's making homemade pizza with five varieties of meat, plus some of her favorite veggie toppings; she knows Sam will eat vegetables if they're put in front of her, so Cat takes the opportunity to do that whenever possible.

Sam comes back a while later, eyes lighting up the moment she walks in and clearly smells the fresh pizza, because she takes a moment to sniff deeply. "Oh, man, that smells amazing," she grunts. She throws the backpack she's wearing onto the couch, seeming to completely forget about it, and strides quickly over to lean over the kitchen island to be closer to the scent.



Cat laughs. “You can do more than just smell it. Lunch is ready!”

Sam groans with pleasure and rubs her stomach. “I’m *starving*,” she moans.

Cat is extremely curious about the contents of Sam’s backpack, but she keeps that to herself as she serves the two pizzas she made; one entire pizza goes in front of Sam at the dining nook, while Cat grabs a few slices from the other pizza to start with on her side of the table. Sam can either eat the rest of the second pizza now or later on.

They eat together. Sam is evidently ravenous, and has her entire pizza finished in the amount of time it takes Cat to eat her couple of slices. A lot of times, Sam eats like, well, an animal, but Cat enjoys the way she eats, because, especially with Cat’s cooking, she’s effusive with praise. It feels really good to be able to offer Sam something as vital as food, something that wild animals spend nearly their entire lives in pursuit of, especially when Sam finds eating it so clearly pleasurable. Cat has long understood the social power of food, from watching her Nona prepare it for family meals, and for family members to be on their best behavior at least until after they ate. And she also knows how fraught food was for Sam throughout her childhood, although Sam has made mostly oblique references to being hungry a lot, she’s said enough for Cat to get the picture. Cat wishes that someday she can host more meals for friends, but for right now, she’s happy just taking care of Sam’s needs, especially when Sam is so grateful.

Sam is so focused on her pizza that it takes her a moment to recognize another scent that permeates the apartment, to the point that even Cat can smell it now, too. “Why do I smell chocolate?” Sam asks, taking another inquisitive sniff of the air.

Cat breaks into a grin. “Because I made dessert!”

Sam perks up. “Dessert? What kind of dessert?”

Just then, Cat’s timer goes off, and she prances over to the kitchen to turn it off. Sam follows her expectantly, eyes eager and bright. Cat opens the oven and says with a flourish, “I made...pizza cake!”

“Pizza cake?” Sam asks in astonishment, “What’s pizza cake?”

“It’s cake,” Cat begins, pulling it out of the oven, “But it’s also pizza!” Indeed, it has a thin “crust” of moist chocolate cake, and Cat has topped it with buttercream frosting, white chocolate shavings, gummy worms, peanut butter cups, and a smattering of Skittles. It wasn’t actually baking in the oven, because if it were, all the frosting and toppings would have melted off. It was just sitting in the remaining warmth after the oven was turned off when the pizzas were ready, but it was enough to fill the air with the smell of chocolate, and make the pizza cake deliciously warm.

“When did you come up with this?” Sam asks keenly, staring at Cat’s concoction.

“A while ago,” Cat replies simply.

“Why didn’t you make it *immediately*?” she asks forcefully.

“Because I wanted to save it for a special occasion! Besides, I had to make sure it would work first. I made a few practice batches at Nona’s before I figured it out.”

“This is the best day ever,” Sam replies as Cat cuts into her pizza cake.

It’s rich, the flavors are a jumbled mess, but a delicious one, in Cat’s opinion. It’s clear that Sam agrees from the way she groans and asks for another slice.

After lunch, Sam moves over to the couch, rubbing her belly, and Cat joins her. “So, how did it go at the store?” she asks.

This time, Sam looks like she might be blushing a little. “Fine,” she says quickly. “Uh, one of the workers there kind of clocked me as a newbie, but she helped me find what I was looking for.” She reaches for her backpack, but then pauses, and says, “I’m really too full to...you know.”

“That’s fine. Because I don’t want to do that right now, either. Instead, I want to watch some movies!”

“Oh, yeah, okay, sure,” Sam responds, moving her hand away from her backpack. Then she squints at Cat suspiciously. “These are going to be boring rom-coms, aren’t they?”

“They’ll be romantic comedies, but they won’t be boring,” Cat promises.

Sam groans. Cat smiles and puts the first DVD in their DVD player. “This is one of my favorites *ever*,” she comments.

Sam sits up a little with interest as the title screen plays. Finally, she admits. “I’ve seen this one.”

“See? I told you I wasn’t going to show boring movies,” Cat assures her as she presses play on *The Princess Bride*.

*The Princess Bride* seems completely tolerable to Sam, who seems to pay attention and laugh at all the right parts, and doesn’t even mind the times when Cat quotes along with the movie. Next, though, Cat puts on *Clueless*, and though Sam doesn’t complain and she does laugh occasionally, she doesn’t seem quite as invested. In fact, about halfway through the film, she’s snuggling closer to Cat, nuzzling her ear, hands playing with the hem of her dress, fingers running lightly over her thigh just beneath it.

“Do you need something?” Cat asks her, eyes still on the screen.

Sam doesn’t answer verbally at first, just nuzzles closer and starts kissing Cat’s neck. Cat tilts her head, inviting access, but she doesn’t stop watching her movie. Finally, Sam whispers, “I think you know what I need.”

Cat grins. She’d *certainly* planned on trying out their new purchase later, but...in her plans for the day, she *had* wanted to finish watching *Clueless* first. Though, as Sam’s lips suck lightly at her neck, she wonders if she couldn’t be persuaded otherwise.

Maybe she can make Sam *work* for it. Just the idea of holding out until they're both desperate makes Cat squirm a little. Though, maybe that's also the way Sam's hand runs blunt nails lightly down her outer thigh.

Cat's breath hitches, but she insists. "I'm watching a movie."

Sam pauses. "Oh," she says, sounding disappointed, and begins to draw away.

"I didn't say you had to stop," Cat says quickly, pointedly.

"*Oh*," Sam says again, then shifts closer to Cat again.

For the next several minutes, Cat does her best to keep her attention on the screen as Sam's hands wander over her body and her lips press kisses to every patch of skin she can reach. Sam deftly cups her breast, fingers stroking over it, as she nibbles gently on Cat's earlobe, which is *incredibly* distracting, but Cat manages to keep watching her movie until Sam's hand is under her dress, fingertips trailing up her inner thigh, dipping beneath the bottom hem of her panties—

Cat closes her legs around Sam's hand, gasping breathlessly. "O-okay," she manages, "I can finish this movie later."

In response, Sam kisses her, and Cat kisses back fervently, finally giving in to Sam's torment, finally revealing just how well her seduction worked. She feels Sam grin and chuckle into the kiss, and she pulls away to murmur, "So, you want me now, huh?"

"Yes," Cat replies, voice trembling a little. "And I want...what's in your backpack."

"My Art History textbook?" Sam asks in mock confusion, clearly playing ignorant.

Cat swats her arm playfully. "You know what I mean."

Sam grins, and glances back toward the bedroom. "Should we, uh..."

"Yes," Cat replies decisively, and the two of them hurry back toward the bedroom. Cat can feel her legs trembling as she quickly walks, can feel her own heart hammering in excitement. They're really about to *do* this.

When they get to the bedroom, Cat seats herself on the bed, and Sam sets down her backpack. She glances at Cat uncertainly as she starts to unzip it. "Guess I should—"

"Can I see it?" Cat asks, wanting to know what Sam bought.

"Sure," Sam replies. First, she takes out two boxes and a smaller plastic bottle and lays them on the bed in front of Cat.

Cat's eyes are drawn to the first box, and she picks up the box containing her chosen pastel unicorn horn dildo. It's...bigger than she anticipated. "Oh," she murmurs, feeling hot as she considers it, and sets it down quickly. "What's this?" she asks, picking up the next box.

“It’s a basic harness,” Sam replies. “The saleslady helped me pick it out. She said it didn’t make sense to spend a lot on an expensive one when we’re just trying it out, and that this one is pretty good for being inexpensive. So.” She shrugs, then points to the last thing. “And she recommended we use lube. Even if you’re really wet. So it’ll be more comfortable.”

Cat hadn’t considered that, and blushes a little at Sam so casually talking about her being so wet. Those are the kinds of words Sam usually husks in her ear when she fingers her, not words she just...tosses out there. So Cat just nods and gestures to Sam. “Guess you should go put it on,” she instructs.

“Be right back,” Sam says quickly, taking the harness and the dildo and heading into the bathroom.

Meanwhile, Cat strips down to just her underwear. There’s something *very* sexy to her about letting Sam remove her undergarments, but with something like the dress she’d been wearing, that’s less fun, because it gets complicated.

Cat reclines on the pillows in her underwear, waiting for Sam, who emerges a few minutes later. She’s still wearing her t-shirt, but her legs are bare, and instead of underwear, she’s wearing what looks like a vinyl harness, made up of various straps circling her waist and thighs, and right there, standing boldly erect, is the unicorn horn.

Cat giggles. She can’t help it. Sam frowns, looking a little defensive, and Cat quickly apologizes. “I’m sorry. It just—the unicorn horn just looks so *silly* there.”

Sam grins a little and jerks a thumb behind her, toward the bathroom. “Oh, I can go back in and see if I can figure out how to strap it to my head if you want.”

“Don’t be silly.” Cat sits up, leaning toward Sam invitingly.

“You’re the one who picked this out,” Sam reminds her, still sounding a little self-conscious.

“I know,” Cat replies. “I’m sorry I laughed. I’m really laughing at myself, for choosing this one.”

“Well, I *am* glad it doesn’t look like a dick. I think that’d be weird.” Sam wrinkles her nose. “I mean,” she amends quickly, “I’d wear one if you were into that, though. Like if you wanted me to roleplay being a guy or whatever.”

“I want you to be *you*,” Cat assures her, reaching for her, sitting at the edge of the bed. Then she glances down and another giggle escapes her. “You with a unicorn horn for a...thingy.”

“Yeah, it’s *very* me,” Sam says dryly.

“Why are you wearing your shirt?”

Sam shrugs. “I didn’t know what you wanted from me.”

“I want to feel your body against mine,” Cat says softly.

Sam smirks and almost immediately tosses her t-shirt over her head as she moves closer to Cat. "Why are you wearing your underwear?"

"So you can take them off."

Sam hums approval in her throat and is quickly standing at the edge of the bed, between Cat's legs. Before long, they have each other's bras off, and then Sam is kneeling to pull Cat's panties down her legs. She stays kneeling after she tosses them aside, grins up at Cat, and then kisses her way up Cat's thighs.

Cat's back arches and she throws her head back at the first touch of Sam's mouth, at the soft groan of pleasure from her lover as her tongue moves. Cat moans out her own echo of the sound, then gasps at the sensation of strong hands gripping her hips and tugging her closer to the edge of the bed, closer to Sam's mouth.

"God, you're already soaked," Sam comments a moment later.

"*Sam*," she gasps, both a plea and an admonishment.

"You ready for this?" Sam asks, "You want me?"

"Yes," Cat whimpers, feeling a tingling in her pelvis and a warmth that dances all down her limbs.

Almost immediately, Sam climbs onto the bed with her, and Cat backs herself up to prop herself against the pillows. Sam is kneeling before her, and reaches to grab the bottle of lube she'd purchased. She squirts some onto her palm and starts rubbing it onto the unicorn horn. "Ugh," she says a moment later, "That's a lot more than I realized." She holds up her hand, wet and slick with the lube.

"Oh." Cat rolls to grab a tissue, handing it to Sam, who wipes off her hand and then tosses it aside.

"Okay, ready?" she asks again.

"Yes," Cat replies, with a touch of impatience. She's lying here with her legs spread, for God's sake.

It takes Sam a few tries to find a position that seems to work for her to start trying to slip the dildo inside of Cat, and Cat has been poked by the end of it several times, but finally, Cat feels the tip of it, cool and wet, pressing just barely inside of her. She holds her breath as Sam adjusts the way she's crouched, scooting closer, and pushes in a little more. She's moving slowly, both because of the position she's in and, with the way she keeps looking up at Cat's face, it's obvious that she's being careful, cautious with how quickly she moves.

"You can give me more," Cat prompts.

"Trying to," Sam grunts, and pulls out to readjust entirely, tugging to tighten her straps, and slips back in a few moments later, leaning over Cat, one hand between their bodies to guide the toy.

Cat lifts her hips, trying to give more access, and she feels Sam push inside a little deeper until a sharp gasp from Cat stops her.

“What?” Sam asks, a strong note of worry in her tone.

“It’s just a lot.” Sam starts to pull out, but Cat quickly says, “No, no wait. Give me a minute.” Cat takes a few deep breaths. She’s an actor, she’s a singer, she knows how her body works, she probably just needs to relax. “Okay,” she says, “Again.”

Sam sinks deeper, but it isn’t Cat that stops her this time, it’s as if she *can’t* go in any further, and Cat feels a sharp, stinging, stretching sensation between her legs, and emits a moan, borne of frustration and desire and discomfort. Her whimper causes Sam to withdraw. “Am I hurting you?” she asks in alarm.

“It’s just intense,” Cat tries, because she *really* wants this, she *really* wants this to work.

“It feels like I can’t go in any deeper,” Sam says cautiously. She must be able to see in Cat’s expression how disappointed and frustrated she is, because she quickly pivots to, “Why don’t we try with you on top?”

“Me on top?” Cat repeats uncertainly. This is *not* how the fantasy is supposed to go.

“Yeah. Because then if it hurts, you can stop, but if it doesn’t...you can keep going.”

Cat supposes it’s a fair suggestion, and she and Sam switch positions quickly. Cat tries to figure out the best way to crouch over Sam’s hips, and first prods herself firmly in the backside a few times with the tip of the unicorn horn. “Whoops,” she laughs, and readjusts, setting the tip just inside herself.

“You look gorgeous,” Sam comments in a low voice, seeming entranced by the sight of her on top of her.

Cat feels heat on her face, and takes it as a cue to start moving as she sinks down onto the horn, hands on Sam’s chest for balance. Sam’s hands are on her hips, not guiding or gripping, just resting there, as if Sam needs to be part of the action even as she remains still beneath Cat.

But the same thing happens. After a certain point, Cat just...can’t sink down anymore, and the pleasurable sensations give way to a now painful stinging. She whines, and Sam grabs her arms, her shoulders, trying to offer comfort and stability, but Cat just rolls off of her and faces away from her.

“It’s no use,” Cat sighs in defeat, “I can’t do it. I’m broken.”

“What are you *talking* about?” Sam asks, moving closer to her on the bed and promptly stabbing Cat in the butt cheek with her strap-on. Sam can’t help but chuckle as she adjusts herself, and it’s enough to make Cat turn to actually look at her, blurred though she is through the tears in Cat’s eyes. “Did you really expect me to just, like, pound you the first time out?” Sam asks.

“Yeah,” Cat replies. “That’s what happens to other girls, right?”

“I don’t know. I hope not. I always heard to take it slow. I mean, think about it. You’ve never had more than like, this,” Sam holds up two fingers, “in there. This is *more*.”

“But why can’t I just do it? I thought I was supposed to...stretch?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we just need more time, and to take it slow. I mean, this thing tapers, or whatever. It gets pretty thick. Maybe it’s just too much right now after a certain point.”

“I just really wanted to try this,” Cat whines, feeling frustrated and sad and disappointed and like she’s ruined her day.

“I’ve got an idea,” Sam says, standing up quickly and tugging her straps loose.

“We don’t have to give up,” Cat argues feebly.

“I’m not ‘giving up’ on you,” Sam replies, sounding a little impatient. “Just let me try something, and if you don’t like it, we’ll try something else, okay?”

“Okay,” Cat sighs.

Sam is completely naked now, the strap-on just lying next to them on the bed, as if forgotten, and Sam climbs on top of Cat and begins to kiss her. Gentle kisses, slow kisses, reassuring kisses. Building Cat back up from her state of frustration to a *different* flavor of frustration, one Cat communicates by digging her fingers into Sam’s back, lifting her hips up against her partner’s, curling one leg around Sam’s body, whimpering, no longer in self-pity but in desire.

Sam scrapes her teeth delicately against Cat’s neck, making her quiver, as she begins to kiss her way down Cat’s body. Before long, she’s exactly where she was at the beginning of all of this, between Cat’s legs, nipping lightly at Cat’s inner thigh as her lips move closer and closer.

Cat feels her tongue, a broad lick that quickly shifts to focused attention with the very tip, and she moans, closing her eyes. This isn’t really what she had in mind, but she’s not about to stop Sam. It feels too *good* to want to stop.

But after a moment, Sam’s the one who stops. Cat blinks open her eyes, confused, feeling Sam leaning over her legs. She looks down her body to realize that Sam is reaching for the strap-on.

“Are you going to put it on your head?” Cat asks, honestly a little confused.

“No, silly,” Sam chuckles. She shifts to lean on an elbow and Cat can see that she’s pulling the unicorn horn out of the harness.

“Then...” But Cat goes quiet as she begins to understand. She watches as Sam tosses the harness to the side, and then lowers her mouth back between Cat’s legs. Cat gasps and tips her head back again.

It takes a few moments, and a few deliberate adjustments of Sam's position that Cat can feel, and notices when it makes Sam pause what she's been doing, but then, Cat feels the tip of the toy, just barely slipping inside of her.

She whimpers her approval, and glances down her body again. Sam is angled a little off-center, and the unicorn horn is held under her chin as she moves it slowly and steadily in and out of Cat.

There's no painful stretching sensation, though Cat can tell that Sam isn't trying to push in deep, she's just providing some extra stimulation as she continues to go down on Cat. And though Cat longs for more, wants to feel *fuller*, she appreciates the delicate motion and friction of the toy inside of her as Sam's mouth works. She just lets herself float on the deliciously good feelings Sam is giving her, feeling herself grow tighter around the toy, gasping at the way it changes how it feels to have something inside of her and moving in this way, and quickly, the combination of everything pushes her over the edge and she's gripping Sam's hair and coming, hips lifting to meet her mouth, flexing to push back against the toy, and Cat isn't in control of her motions, only knows her body wants more, more everything, more all of it.

When she finally lets go of Sam's hair, Sam takes that as her cue to finally stop, and she lifts her head and withdraws the toy from inside of Cat and tosses it next to them on the bed so that she can focus on settling next to Cat to hold her.

"Well?" Sam finally asks, a note of triumph in her voice. "Was that a total failure?"

"No," Cat breathes, nuzzling closer. "Thank you." Sam just chuckles and continues to hold her as Cat starts to make sense of the world beyond the pleasure she was just engulfed in. Finally, she asks, "What about you?"

Sam shrugs; Cat can feel her shoulder move under her head. "Whatever you feel like. If you feel like much of anything after that," she says proudly.

Cat lifts herself up to look at Sam, abruptly curious about something. "What if I want to use the horn on you?"

Sam tilts her head, regarding Cat uncertainly. "Like, you want to wear it?"

Cat had merely been considering doing something similar to what Sam had just done to her, but now she's curious about *that*. "Maybe. Um. Or I could just..." She wiggles her hand.

Sam laughs. "I don't know whether that means use your fingers or just hold it."

But on a whim, Cat decides, selfishly, that she'd really rather Sam be the first one to successfully wear the strap-on. If Cat can ever learn to enjoy it. But she refuses to let herself get drawn into *that* again and picks up the discarded unicorn dildo. "What do you say?" she asks, wiggling her eyebrows.

Sam glances at it, looking skeptical but curious. "If that's what you want, I'm game."



Cat grins and begins kissing Sam. The more they kiss, though, the less Cat wants to stop. She wants to feel close to Sam, to feel as much of her skin as possible. And so, she stays pressed up next to her, fingers slipping between her legs, dipping inside of her. She's *so wet*. But Cat remembers what Sam had been told at the sex toy store: lube, even if she's really wet.

The unicorn horn isn't so wet anymore, so Cat adds lube and, with Sam's help, holds it just *there*, just about to slide into Sam. "Ready?" she asks Sam.

"Sure," Sam answers, then leans in to capture Cat's lips in a kiss as Cat begins to press the toy inside.

She moves slowly, gradually, slipping part of the toy in and then dragging it back out, feeling Sam's reactions in the way she returns her kisses, in the motion of her body, in the sounds she makes in her throat. She feels Sam shifting slightly, and glances down to see that Sam is touching herself as Cat continues to manipulate the toy.

Everything seems to be moving pretty easily, so Cat allows the toy to sink in a little deeper. For the first time, Sam draws a sharp breath. "Okay?" Cat asks breathlessly, too focused and eager to ask a full question.

"Yeah," Sam replies, "Just intense."

Cat uses that as her guide, and tries not to push Sam further as she steadily thrusts the dildo, and before long, Sam's body is lifting off the mattress in her own orgasm, her teeth sinking into Cat's shoulder to muffle her moans as Cat holds her body as close as she can, still trying to maintain the rhythm of her thrusts.

When Sam finally flops back against her pillows, Cat tries to look down at where she was bitten. "Sorry," Sam mutters.

"It's okay," Cat laughs softly, "If it leaves a mark, it's at least easy to cover up."

"Too bad my bites don't do anything, or we could have a crazy night tomorrow," Sam mumbles, still seeming hazy from her orgasm.

The idea makes Cat's heart flutter, as she thinks about what it would be like to romp and play with both Sam and Carly like that. She wonders if Sam is thinking about Carly, too. It almost distracts her from the obvious realization that Sam did not have nearly the same kinds of issues taking a lot more of that toy than Cat did. "How was that?" Cat asks her.

Sam scrunches her face. "You know, I didn't really know what to expect, but that was *good*."

"It didn't seem to hurt you," Cat observes, trying to disguise her own...envy? Shame? Guilt? She isn't quite sure what she feels.

Sam sits up, a little unsteadily, like her muscles are still a bit shaky from her orgasm. She's clearly sensed Cat's mood because she places a hand on her back. "I guess I'm just built different than you. I mean, it makes sense. You're this," she gestures with her hand, "delicate little flower. I'm such a...a brute, really. An animal."

“Oh you are not,” Cat refutes, though a part of her likes that Sam sees her as something so precious, something worth defending.

“Sure I am,” Sam says easily. “And so what if this means we take our time a little more while we explore this with you? It’s not like fucking you slowly has ever been *boring*.”

“*Sam*,” She’s so vulgar sometimes, but Cat appreciates the sentiment. “I’m sorry we didn’t get to really use your new harness.”

“We used it. And it’s okay. I know it’ll get plenty of use in the future.” She hugs Cat, tucking her face into Cat’s neck. “If it’s something you still want, we’ll work on it. And we’ll keep working on it until I can pound you the way you *really* need.”

“*Sam*,” she says again, but it’s more like a moan this time. Because with how much Cat likes the way Sam gets a little rough just grinding on her...Cat thinks she’ll *really* like a hearty strap-on fuck.

Just as soon as she figures out what’s wrong with her body.

“I’m hungry,” Sam interrupts her thoughts. “What’s for dinner?”

Cat laughs, and it’s hard to feel like there’s very much wrong with her as she makes a meal that delights Sam so completely. And later, at bedtime, as their kisses and snuggles turn into yet more sex...it almost must be some kind of record for them, Cat thinks.

As she falls asleep, she doesn’t think there’s anything wrong with her at all. She feels respected, appreciated, *loved*...

*And, she thinks, I’m going to see Carly tomorrow.*

The wave of giddiness this produces just adds to her elation.

Valentine’s Day is a *good* day. And ultimately, went pretty much exactly the way she wanted.

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The full moon hangout at Shadow Creek Park goes fine. Despite Carly’s concerns about feeling like the biggest fifth wheel ever, the two couples aren’t acting much differently than they normally do. Or at least, the moments when they get a little too sappy or affectionate are easy for Carly to just turn away from and tune out. At the very least, it feels as though the couples are trying to be discreet and considerate of her feelings.

Even Cat. Especially Cat.

When Carly arrives at Tori’s house so they can all have dinner before they go to the park, Sam and Cat are already there. Sam merely nods a greeting at her, looking oddly guilty, but Cat bursts out excitedly, “*Carly!*”

“Hi, Cat,” she answers warily. Now that she has processed just how much Cat knows, it just feels so *obvious* how much she’s overcompensating with trying to be accepting of Carly,

despite the near-betrayal Carly and Sam perpetrated against Cat.

“It’s good to see you!” Cat chirps, approaching her awkwardly, looking like she’d like to offer a hug, but isn’t sure it would be welcome.

Carly glances back to see Jade suppressing a wry sort of grin, and realizes she’s not the only one who can see through Cat’s facade. But on the other hand, *fuck it*. Yeah, Carly wants a hug. A hug sounds nice. Other than Andre holding her while she cried last night, it feels like it’s been forever since she had a hug.

Actually, her last hug was probably from Cat, too, during the last full moon.

And if Cat is offering another now? Sure. Carly accepts the hug, closing her eyes and letting Cat wrap surprisingly strong, lithe arms around her. Even if she sometimes worries Cat is being a little two-faced with her, she can’t deny that the young woman gives *great* hugs.

When they pull apart, Cat seems overcome with glee, and squeals, dancing in place. “I *love* the full moon!” she crows.

Carly can’t help but wonder if this, too, is an overcompensation of sorts, maybe disguising her disgust for Carly after being so close to her.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jade drawls, though she’s smiling slightly. “It’s fun for everyone, even when you don’t become a fluffy little monster. Come on, let’s eat.”

“I’m not sure I like being thought of as a ‘fluffy little monster,’” Sam comments dryly.

“But you *are*!” Cat coos, wrapping her arms around Sam from the side, pinning her arms to her body, nose nuzzling her cheek.

“Oh, don’t you start,” Sam grumbles, blushing slightly. Carly looks away. Getting Sam to blush was always something that gave her *such* a thrill when they were together, both because it was so rare, as Sam has always been unflappable, and because it was the kind of reaction that could happen around other people, and only Carly would understand it.

She glances at Tori, mostly to have something else to focus on, but Tori seems to take it as a plea for help and quickly says, “Carly, can you help me with these hamburgers?”

“I’d love to,” Carly replies quickly. She keeps an eye on the sizzling meat in the big pan on the stovetop while Tori and Jade get out condiments from the fridge and line them up on the kitchen island. Sam and Cat, meanwhile, are sitting together on one of the couches. Carly doesn’t look too closely to see if they’re being extra snoodly, instead trying to keep her focus on the burgers. But it’s not easy. It’s especially hard to ignore Sam when she’s *right there*, being her casual, carefree, confident, and utterly charismatic self.

It’s so *stupid* how hot she is without even trying.

Once they’re in wolf form, though, it’s a lot like last month: everything melts away, and it’s just fun and connection and respect and a joyous reunion of their little pack.

Until the morning, when it's abruptly weird again.

Carly hangs around for a little while; after breakfast at Tori's, Jade suggests they all watch a movie, and since they don't often have time to hang out after a wolf night during the school year, they're all game. But after the movie, they're all pretty clearly drained, so they go their separate ways. Carly goes home and takes a nap, then finishes homework and entertains herself for the rest of the evening.

And then it's back to school on Monday. Back to real life, or whatever, where she mostly sees Andre or Tori during the day, and never Sam. Except when she catches a glimpse of wild blonde hair on a stranger across campus, and for an instant, her heart leaps. But it's never Sam. It's only ever her hopeful imagination.

Her friendship with Tori is the same as always—familiar, candid, delightful—whether they're talking over schoolwork or just chatting about TV, or family, or stupid internet memes. Her birthday is the Wednesday after the full moon, and though there's really no time for a party, Carly makes sure to bring her some cake and a gift (a ceramic microphone she paints at Color Me Pot, which prompts Tori to cry out, “I love Color Me Pot!”).

Her friendship with Andre remains the same, too, though there's a hiccup there for a day or so. Andre seems inclined to treat her with kid gloves the next time they see each other after Valentine's Day, but Carly makes clear, implicitly, anyway, that she doesn't want to discuss crying all over him, and he adapts. Soon, they're back to their friendly dynamic, with jokes and a comfortable, pleasant baseline.

Andre's a good friend. Though Carly never takes him up on his offer to call him when she feels lonely, he does ask her to hang out a little more frequently. She's grateful for it.

Spring Break falls about three weeks later, in the middle of March, and by some stroke of weird luck, there's a lot of overlap. At least between Tori and Carly's school and Jade's. Sam and Cat's spring break had just happened the week before, but they do have a school holiday off in the middle of everyone else's spring break.

And, somehow, Freddie's spring break also overlaps with Carly's. It was something they realized the month before, and Freddie made plans to come down and visit. There wasn't a lot Carly could do to dissuade him, and honestly, maybe she didn't want to. If Freddie could provide a buffer last time that allowed her and Sam to interact, maybe it could happen again.

It does mean, however, that Freddie will be staying with her through this break, since Sam and Cat don't have the same kind of free time as she does. Tori offers to let him stay on her couch if Carly needs some space, though Carly wants to avoid that if possible. It's impossible to know when Trina might show up, and given her reaction to Freddie last time she saw him, it's probably best to keep Trina and Freddie apart.

At the very least, Carly prepares Freddie for the strong possibility that due to Sam's schedule, they would not be able to film another episode of *iCarly* while he's in town. And, well, Carly also knows that's probably for the best. The tenuousness of her current dynamic with Sam probably can't withstand the degree of masking and pretending that an episode would entail; it'll be difficult enough maintaining that much to keep Freddie from asking questions.

And everyone else, it turns out. As soon as Robbie hears that Freddie is coming to town, he's planning a party at Beck's. Since Thursday is the day that Sam and Cat's school is closed, the plan is for a Wednesday night party.

After so many weeks of feeling lonesome unless she's at school, Carly's definitely looking forward to it.

Freddie's plan is to come down on the first Saturday of his spring break, but to return on Friday, both to give him that weekend to hang out with his friends as they return to campus and to do the homework he's expected to complete over the break. And that works for Carly, since that second weekend the full moon starts on Saturday, and she hadn't been sure *how* she was going to make sure Freddie wasn't around for any of that.

The day before Freddie is supposed to visit, Carly wonders if she should reach out to Sam, just to touch base and discuss how they want to handle his visit. She opens a text thread, and hesitates. Even if it's completely innocuous, is it weird to text Sam under these circumstances?

She adds Cat to the chat thread, just to cover her bases.

*Carly Shay*

**Hey**

**I thought maybe we should talk**

**since Freddie is visiting**

**You know, about how we want to handle it**

Of course, Cat is the first to respond.

*Cat Valentine*

**Hi, Carly!!**

**I'm excited to see you this week!**

It makes Carly smile a little. It's nice to have an enthusiastic response from *someone*.

*Carly Shay*

**Hi, Cat!**

**Me, too**

**Sam?**

Not surprisingly, Sam leads with snark.

*Sam Puckett*

**I'm excited that you two are excited to see each other?**

Carly rolls her eyes.

*Carly Shay*

**Not that**

**How do we want to handle Freddie?**

*Sam Puckett*

**Oh**

**I dunno**

**I feel like we can just kinda do what we did last time**

**Like we don't have to do any serious acting or pretending**

**Just be natural when it makes sense to be natural**

**If that makes sense**

It *does* make sense. Because so much of how they interacted last time *was* natural, was just the two of them allowing themselves to be close again, for parts of them under the surface to come out, for their old dynamic to return. Carly wonders if Cat knows how natural it all was, if Sam saying this is something of a revelation for her.

It's interesting that Sam doesn't seem to think the confession of their feelings makes any difference in this. But then, Carly realizes, maybe the only difference *is* the confession. She knows that, for her, those feelings have been present for a very long time.

Maybe they have been for Sam as well.

Carly doesn't dwell on it. It's moot. Instead, she focuses on Freddie's visit, which is exciting. It's going to be nice to actually have *plans* for Spring Break.

Freddie arrives on Saturday evening, and they pick up some pizzas and go over to Sam and Cat's for dinner. But because Sam and Cat have to spend Sunday doing homework, Carly and Freddie spend Sunday with Tori, Jade, and Andre, hanging out in West Hollywood. On Monday, Robbie suggests they take Freddie to the Air & Space Center, which proves to be a big hit for Freddie. For Carly, it's not quite as interesting, but she still has a good time hanging out with Beck and shrugging as the two nerds gush over the space shuttle.

By the time Wednesday comes, Carly is ready for an actual party. Sight-seeing is fun, especially in a city she lives in yet still hasn't had a chance to see a lot of, but she's ready for a day without itineraries.

They head over to Beck's just as it starts to get dark, and everyone greets each other as if this is the first time they've seen each other since New Year's. It's partly in jest, since they've pretty much all already seen each other over Spring Break, but also partly a true representation of how little just plain socializing they all have time for when school is in session and they're scattered all over Los Angeles.

And, in keeping up appearances, even she and Sam act as though they haven't seen each other for years, and even *hug*. Something Sam certainly doesn't normally do.

It's enough to make Carly feel a little self-conscious, and she pulls away first, but covers it by immediately telling Sam in a conspiratorial voice, "You know, I heard Beck ordered a ham for this party."

"Really?" Sam asks, turning wide eyes to Beck.

"Uhh." Beck looks confused and maybe a little irritated, like he suspects Carly is playing a prank at his expense. "No?"

Sam turns a wounded gaze to Carly. "Why would you play with my emotions like that?" she asks, hand to her heart.

"I must have gotten bad information," Carly sighs, casting a glance at Freddie.

"What are you blaming *me* for?" Freddie asks, alarmed.

But other than Beck's skepticism, no one seems to be taking any of this seriously, and Beck promises that they're going to order "the good" pizza, referencing one of the preferred pizza places.

As the party progresses, Carly wonders if starting things out so playfully with Sam was truly the best idea. Because it's starting to feel like now that they've been so silly with each other...it's difficult to stop. In fact, Sam seems to be hanging all over her. Not to be outdone, Cat kind of is, too, which is the opposite of what Carly was expecting; she'd assumed Cat would be jealously clingy with *Sam*.

It's all a little overwhelming, and at a certain point, Carly excuses herself and goes to get some air.

She's engrossed enough in her own internal chaos that it takes her a moment to sense that Jade has followed her, but she turns to look at her before Jade says anything to announce herself, indeed, before she's even close enough for it to make sense for her to say anything.

Jade pauses when Carly turns to her, then shakes her head. "I'll never get used to the way you guys can hear *everything*," she says, almost to herself, but Carly can hear her clear as day.

"Not just hear," Carly says when Jade gets closer. "Smell, too."

"Gee, thanks." Jade grabs a lock of her own hair and sniffs it uncertainly.

"It's not a bad thing," Carly chuckles. "You smell, you know. Nice."

"So I've heard." Jade rolls her eyes, then scrutinizes Carly. "You look like you could use a drink."

Carly sighs. "Yeah, I really, really could. But I'm supposed to be designated driver for Freddie and I tonight. Since he's my guest, I wanted to make sure he could drink."

"What, and drive all the way back to your apartment tonight?" Jade says skeptically. "Listen, maybe this is out of line, I know I shouldn't encourage anyone to stop being a designated driver, but...you could just come and sleep it off on Tori's couch instead. I'll drive you there."

Carly knows it's probably not the best decision in the world for her and Sam to *both* be drinking when things are like this. But, she's also long past caring about whether her decisions are good or not. The last time she thought she'd made a really good decision, it had lost her Sam.

*Fuck it.*

"Actually, that sounds great," Carly says. "Thank you."

"Hey, no problem," Jade shrugs. "Go grab a hard lemonade. You deserve it."

Carly squints at her. "I'm actually not sure if you're mocking me or not."

"Only out of habit," Jade replies. "This is a genuine offer to help you improve your night."

"And I appreciate it," Carly replies as she and Jade head back inside and Carly makes a beeline for the cooler of icy drinks.



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It's been a little while since Sam was drunk.

She'd kind of forgotten how great it feels. She's wondered, more than once tonight, why she doesn't do this a lot more often.

It's like...everything she's been worried about, everything that has made her feel so awful these past few months has just...*evaporated*. The same way all the human shit ceases to matter when she changes form, except...she can drink any old time, she doesn't have to wait for the power of the moon to overtake her.

It's so *freeing*, to feel like she and Carly can just be *themselves*, without having to worry about all the bullshit that hangs between them. At this point, Sam is *over* the bullshit. So, they've fallen back in love. It's not like it was really a surprise. She'd known Carly still had feelings for her back when she wrote that postcard, when they'd already been separated for over a year. And Sam had known her own feelings had never really disappeared.

Who *cares*? Cat sure doesn't. Cat, in fact, feels much the same way that Sam does, even if she's never used the word *love* to describe her feelings. But in this state of mind, Sam figures she doesn't have to. Maybe they're both allowed to just *love* Carly. It's not doing either of them any harm, it's not doing Carly any harm. It's just...the way things are and Sam is tired of fighting it.

She notices, because she can't *not* notice Carly, when Carly starts drinking. Freddie notices, too.

"Hey," he frowns, squinting a little, evidence of his inebriation. "I thought you were designated driver tonight."

"I *was*," Carly says succinctly. "Now it's Jade."

"Ooh, cool!" Freddie gushes. "Thanks, Jade!"

"No problem," Jade drawls, looking amused. "Drink up. You're in good hands."

"Ooh, yay!" Cat comments as Carly takes a long swig. "Now you can *really* join the party!"

"I am *beyond* ready," Carly comments.

"Want to come sing with me?" Cat asks, tugging at Carly's hand.

Carly laughs, and already the sound of it is more relaxed, more carefree. "Let's do it."

Sam watches them go. She realizes, with an odd churning in her stomach, that Cat seems to prefer singing with Carly to singing with her.

Oh well. Sam prefers to watch them sing, anyway. She *can* sing, sure. But she prefers to keep her microphone time reserved for freestyle battles.

After they sing, they sit on what passes for a couch in Beck's trailer. Seating can get a little crowded in the RV; there's Beck's bed, and then something that resembles a sectional sofa. Beck and Robbie typically sit on Beck's bed, since it feels a little personal, though Jade has been known to comfortably seat herself there, leading Tori to join her. But Tori and Jade are seated on one end of the sectional sofa right now, and Carly and Cat sit on the other. Andre and Freddie sit on the floor, perhaps giving the girls priority for the actual seats.

Sam is up, grabbing another drink, and considers her options. But really, why *shouldn't* she sit right next to Carly? If they sit close together, then there's room for Andre and Freddie to sit, too, if they want to.

Not that she's thinking of Andre and Freddie at all as she slides in right up close to Carly.

"You guys sounded great," she praises around the neck of the bottle she's sipping from.

"Isn't Carly just *incredible*?" Cat gushes, hand on Carly's arm.

Carly chuckles self-consciously. "It's mostly because you're so good, you bring it out of me," she tells Cat.

A joint is making its way around the room. "Since you've joined the party," Andre addresses Carly, passing it to the three of them.

Cat giggles as she takes a small hit, which tends to be her limit, and calls herself a "one-hit wonder" and laughs as she passes it to Carly.

Carly takes a single, deep hit, and sighs out her exhale. "I needed that," she breathes, passing it to Sam.

Sam takes the joint between her lips. She had a hit as the party started, but she's mostly been drinking tonight. Still, she thinks, she could probably stand to mellow out, what with the way her heart is thudding in her chest from being *so close* to Carly.

The tip of the joint is still moist from Carly's mouth. Sam closes her eyes and breathes in. It's like a kiss, but not at all, just a shared, communal experience, with her and Carly and even Cat right in the midst of it. She leans over the sectional sofa to pass the joint to Tori.

"Okay, maybe we should take this outside." Beck eyes the haze gathering at his ceiling and frowns.

Tori groans. "Right when it gets to me, of course." She stands up reluctantly. "You guys coming?" she asks the three of them.

"I'm a one-hit wonder!" Cat repeats her joke.

"I'm good." Carly lifts her beverage.

"Same," Sam replies.

“More for me,” Tori replies airily, following the boys outside, Jade at her side, clearly distracted by something on her phone. “You’re coming, too?” Tori asks Freddie, sounding a little surprised, and he responds in the affirmative as the door to the RV shuts.

And suddenly, Sam, Cat, and Carly are alone.

Sam’s heart goes into double time. She looks at Cat. Cat looks as frozen and alarmed as she feels. All night, she’s been feeling like it doesn’t fucking matter that she loves Carly, she’s been dancing *right up* against that line of what’s appropriate to do in front of their friends, and now their friends are gone.

Sam doesn’t know whether to run or just turn and kiss the girl beside her.

“So…” Carly drawls slowly, clearly also feeling the tension in the room.

Cat laughs, a nervous titter. Sam still feels frozen, and swallows hard. “Great party,” she finally comments.

Carly laughs this time, and it’s awkward. “Yeah,” she agrees. She takes a long drink. She only started drinking a little bit ago (what, ten minutes? Fifteen? Sam has no idea how quickly or slowly time is passing right now, when every moment sitting with her shoulder brushing Carly’s feels like an eternity), but she’s already almost finished her first drink. Carly shifts as if she’s going to stand. “I should get another—”

“I’ll get it for you,” Sam interrupts, already falling into that baseline of devotion when it comes to her first girlfriend. But she can’t seem to get to her feet.

Carly looks at her, eyes soft. “You don’t have to—”

The door to the RV opens, bringing with it the sound of a hacking cough. Freddie stumbles in, coughing into his hand, Robbie just beside him.

“It’s okay,” Robbie says reassuringly. “Coughing is normal. Is this your drink?” He picks up a beer that’s over near where Freddie and Andre had been sitting on the floor.

Freddie nods, then manages to say, “I know it’s normal.” He grabs the drink from Robbie and takes a gulp, then coughs some more. “Doesn’t mean I like it,” he gets out.

“I’m not sure the drink will help you much,” Robbie observes. “That dry mouth can be tough to get rid of.”

“I know,” Freddie repeats. His coughing is dying down. “You didn’t have to leave the circle,” he tells Robbie.

“I know,” Robbie shrugs. “But I’m good only having a little.”

“Robbie’s like me!” Cat announces. Both boys look over at them like they’ve forgotten they were there.

“What, a lightweight?” Freddie asks, tone a little bit caustic.

Robbie looks hurt. "I just know my limits, and my limits are a little low."

"There's nothing wrong with that!" Cat reassures.

Freddie rolls his eyes. "I'm going back out there." But before he can leave, the rest of the group piles in. "Did you guys finish?" Freddie asks, sounding disappointed.

"Sorry, bro, there wasn't that much left anyway." Andre pats his shoulder. "I'm sure we'll smoke more before the night is over."

Freddie grunts, but he seems to relax now that everyone is back inside. Sam wonders what his problem is.

She wonders what might've happened if Freddie hadn't had a coughing fit. Instead, she finally gets up and grabs Carly another drink, then sits right back next to her.

She smells *good*. Cat smells good. The combination is intoxicating.

Maybe Cat was onto something when she'd talked about how them loving the same person could be fun. Maybe they could love Carly *together*. Maybe Sam has finally wrapped her mind around the idea that love shouldn't be miserable, love should be celebrated, and maybe she's finally ready to let go of all the shame about betrayal and just...love two people. It's starting to feel more and more possible, mostly because she *has* been loving two people for so long now, she might as well embrace it. It's not going to change, and drunk Sam is tired of feeling shitty about it. Life should be about feeling *good*.

If only she hadn't missed her opportunity to make a move. But there isn't another chance at the party that night; they aren't left alone again.

Finally, in the early hours of the next morning, Jade says she's ready to drive them home. There's a lot of groaning and mock-pleading, but honestly, everyone is starting to look a little tired. Andre even starts nodding off at one point, and when he wakes back up, he blames a late night out with a girl and his grandma waking him up too early.

"Alright, my people with me." Jade gestures with her hand.

Tori is already standing with Jade, but Sam and Cat stand up, and so does Carly, which, Sam had kinda forgotten that Jade was going to be her designated driver, too.

Freddie also stands. "We go with Jade, right?"

"Oh, wait a minute." Carly squints at Sam. "Jade is driving you, too?"

"Yeah," Sam says slowly. "That was the plan since the beginning of the night."

Tori turns to Jade and names the problem. "You don't have enough seat belts for six people. And my dad says a cop will *definitely* pull you over for having too many people in your car."

Jade frowns, eyes scanning the group. "I miscounted," she explains.

“Just because you and Tori are joined at the hip doesn’t mean you’re one person,” Beck teases.

“Look who’s talking.” Jade sends a pointed look toward Beck and Robbie, who are literally sitting so close their hips touch. Beck shifts slightly away from his boyfriend in reaction.

“And, for your information, it wasn’t me or Tori I forgot to count. It was Freddie. Because in my mind I was thinking that it would be the girls at Tori’s tonight.”

“I get it,” Freddie’s shoulders hunch a little.

“Yeah, he’s used to being forgotten.” Sam can’t resist the jab. But she thinks that Jade was probably thinking of the five of them because...the five of them *do* regularly drive together. Every full moon.

“Well,” Andre says through a yawn, “I was planning to stay here in the RV tonight. There’s plenty of room on the couch over here for you, Fred.”

Freddie looks over to Beck uncertainly. “That alright with you?”

Beck shrugs. “No problem. I’ll scrounge up another pillow.”

“Oh, that’ll work! Freddie can stay with the guys and I’ll go with the girls,” Carly says.

“Yeah, it’ll be nice for Freddie to count as a guy for once,” Sam teases again.

“Ooh, sleepover!” Robbie claps excitedly.

“Maybe ‘guys’ is too strong a word,” Jade quips.

Beck wraps a protective arm around Robbie. “I think we’re mostly going to be just sleeping,” he says, defending Robbie.

Robbie’s brow scrunches. “Yeah. A *sleep-over*,” he says matter of factly.

“I’ll text you tomorrow when I can come back over here for my car,” Carly tells Freddie, as they head for the door. “And then we can head back to my apartment from here.”

Beck stands and follows the girls as they leave the RV. “Goodnight. Drive safe, Jade.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jade waves a hand. As they get into the car, Jade muses, “Maybe I should’ve thought of Freddie, but he’ll be fine on Beck’s couch.”

“I’m not sure where you would’ve put him,” Carly says. “Because I’m not even sure where you’re going to put *me*. I don’t know why I didn’t realize you were also driving Sam and Cat. I guess I wasn’t thinking clearly.” She sounds a little anxious. She *smells* a little anxious, too, now that Sam focuses on it. Sam tries to peer past Cat, in the middle seat, but can’t quite see Carly, who is facing the window.

“Yeah, I didn’t think that far ahead either,” Jade says airily. Sam can see her glance up at the rearview mirror. “To be fair, I mostly just knew you needed a drink. I offered my skills as a

designated driver.” She glances toward the passenger seat. “Tori is in charge of accommodations.”

“Gee, thanks.” Sam can hear in her tone that Tori is rolling her eyes. Tori twists in her seat to regard Carly. “Carly, you could probably stay on the couch? Sam and Cat usually share one.”

“I don’t know if that will work for me,” Carly answers quietly, like she’s hoping Sam and Cat can’t hear. But of course, Sam can.

“*Oh*,” Tori says, significance in her tone. Sam frowns at her, wondering what Tori has inferred. “You know what, you can actually stay in my sister’s room. She’s, um...how can I put this...”

“A chaotic mess?” Jade suggests.

“That about sums her up,” Tori sighs. “But even if she pretends she isn’t one, she’s a wolf, too. So at the very least, I can say her room doesn’t smell bad. Though, I’m not sure when she last changed her sheets.”

“Won’t matter to me,” Carly says confidently. “I just need a place to sleep.”

“Well, okay then,” Tori nods. “Yay, sleepover!” She claps, sounding oddly like Robbie.

“Yay,” Jade deadpans, sounding like...well, like herself.

They all enter Tori’s house quietly, knowing that there’s really no actual hiding from Tori’s werewolf parents, but the agreement seems to be that as long as Tori and her friends make an effort to be discreet, her parents turn a blind eye to their partying.

Jade helps Sam and Cat get situated on the couch, pulling out the spare pillows and blankets that they’ve used so many times before, that, like the couches themselves, now seem to permanently carry the lingering scent of both of them. Upstairs, Tori is presumably doing the same for Carly. Sam wonders what it might’ve been like if Carly were on the couch right next to them tonight. She wishes she knew why Carly decided she needed to stay away. Sam doesn’t *want* her to be away. Sam wants Carly right next to her, the way she has been all night, in the dark and quiet of Tori’s living room, where she and Cat could seduce her.

Actually, Sam is so horny she doesn’t think she can sleep.

They follow their routine and get ready for bed in the downstairs bathroom. After Jade goes upstairs and the house starts to sink into silence, she and Cat are wrapped in each other on the couch. Sam can’t help it; her hands start wandering, slipping beneath Cat’s pajamas, slow, soft touches that shy away from the parts of Cat that really make her moan. Soon, Cat is squirming against her, clearly worked up from Sam’s teasing.

“We probably shouldn’t,” Cat breathes. “It’s Tori’s *living room*.”

Sam knows she’s probably right. It isn’t private, and there’s a high chance *someone* in the household will know if they have sex down here. But Sam also can’t bring herself to care about that. “I think I might die if we don’t,” she whispers in Cat’s ear.

The words alone make Cat start to tremble, and then she's turning in Sam's arms, and Sam climbs on top of her, nibbling at her neck.

"I wish you had the strap-on," Cat whispers, which tells Sam exactly how much *she* needs this, too. Since they'd first tried it out, they've played with it a few more times, both with and without the harness, and Cat is increasingly getting more and more comfortable with that degree of penetration. But the idea of Sam *really* fucking her with it is still much more the subject of dirty talk than reality. Well...as far as dirty talk with Cat goes, anyway, which is often not much more than what she said just now.

"I can still be inside you," she murmurs, hearing Cat's breath catch, and her hand slides into Cat's pajama pants, and Cat kisses her to muffle her own moans as they move together, Sam wanting nothing more in this moment than to feel Cat shaking beneath her.

It happens relatively quickly, the kind of orgasm that sneaks up on someone and offers a quick release, if not a powerful one, but this close to bedtime, that seems ideal. Cat holds Sam, encouraging her to stay on top of her, and Sam grinds herself against Cat's thigh, her pelvis, teeth sunk into the meat of her shoulder as she whimpers and brings herself closer and closer to the edge.

"I want you," Cat whispers, "I love you."

Sam feels so full of love that she almost can't contain it, and it feels like it pours out of her with her orgasm, flooding into Cat, the exchange between the two of them so potent, so raw.

As she wraps herself back around Cat as the two of them settle down to sleep, though, it isn't as though Carly has been forgotten. It almost feels like Carly had been there, with the two of them, part of the exchange of love between them.

Or maybe that's just how it feels for Sam. Given that Carly has done her best to stay away from them at Tori's house, maybe she'd be appalled by the thought.

But all Sam knows is, as much as she and Cat love each other, it doesn't take the place of or remove any of the love she has for Carly.

As she drifts off to sleep, she knows she's absolutely ready to embrace this. She'll just have to chat with Cat to make sure they're still on the same page.

## Moisture: Spring

Carly wakes up later than she expects to the next morning. It had taken her some time to fall asleep, in part because it's a new location, but mostly because she couldn't stop thinking about how badly she'd almost screwed everything up the night before.

She'd started drinking, at Jade's nudging, because it had been very difficult to handle everything she'd been feeling, especially with Sam being so *close* to her. Not just physically, which was its own struggle, but emotionally. The way they'd so easily spun back into Carly-and-Sam kind of behavior. It hadn't been lost on Carly the significance of Sam so quickly offering to get her another drink. That had so clearly been the Sam of the past, the Sam who had been devoted to Carly's happiness, even before Carly had really understood why. For a long time, the only person in the world who could make Sam appear even remotely selfless had been Carly.

Now, it seems, it's a distinction she shares with Cat. But to have it happen right in front of Cat had been...too much. Especially when Cat didn't seem to understand its impact, not the way she and Sam did.

No, Carly had been drinking too much, too fast, and had almost let herself believe last night, if only for a moment, that something with Sam might be possible. And that was a dangerously hopeful notion for her to even entertain, even briefly.

It's why she'd made sure she was far away from Sam last night. She'd worried she wouldn't be able to resist the temptation.

And now, she thinks she understands more of why Sam had wanted distance from her to begin with. It's far too painful to be so close to someone she can't be with. This isn't new; this is something she's been wrestling with since they've reconnected. But it's clear to Carly, now, that even the group parties and maybe even the full moon nights are too risky for the two of them.

They need boundaries. And Carly just has to figure out how to enact them.

She heads downstairs to find that not only are Tori, Jade, Sam and Cat awake, but Tori's whole family is down there. Everyone is having breakfast; Tori's dad is dressed for work with his police badge on his suit jacket, which Carly can immediately see makes Sam wary of him.

Most unexpected is Tori's sister, who glares at Carly as she comes down. "Did you enjoy my bed last night?" she asks pointedly.

"Wow, Trina," Tori says before Carly can answer, "That sounded kinda gay."

Trina's mouth drops open. "*Mom!*" she hollers.

Tori's mother sighs. "Trina, gay isn't an insult. Tori, don't try to use gay as an insult."



“I’m allowed,” Tori mumbles.

“Um, sorry about the bed thing,” Carly tries. “I didn’t know you’d be around.”

“It’s not your fault,” Tori says quickly. “Trina never lets any of us know when she’s going to be around.”

“I’m an adult,” Trina says caustically as she butters some toast. “I don’t need you to keep tabs on me.”

“Maybe an adult could buy her own breakfast,” Tori’s father says pointedly.

“*Dad!*”

“Trina, you’re of course welcome to eat whatever you can make for yourself,” Tori’s mother says, side-eyeing her husband a little bit. “But if you remember, it *would* be nice to have a heads up for when you’re going to be around.”

“Whatever,” Trina grumbles.

Tori’s mother smiles at Carly, already looking tired. “That goes for you as well. Have some breakfast.”

“Thanks,” Carly replies, a little wary as she makes her way into the chaos of the kitchen.

“Grab a plate,” Tori gestures vaguely behind her. “I’ll dish you out some eggs and bacon.”

“Yeah *all* the eggs and bacon,” Trina grumbles.

“Maybe you should have let us know you were coming so we could plan for you,” Tori says sweetly. “But, you didn’t, so my friends and I get to eat it.”

“I’ll get more at the store today,” Tori’s mom says wearily. “We’re gonna need it for the full moon this weekend.”

“Ew,” Trina shudders. “You guys have fun being ugly.”

“Aww, you’re so lucky you don’t need the full moon to accomplish that!” Tori mocks.

“Tori,” her mother sighs warningly.

“What?!” Tori cries defensively. “She insulted us first!”

“Here.” Jade passes Carly a mug of coffee. “Sit somewhere so you’re out of the way. I’ll bring you a plate in a minute.”

“Thanks.” Carly takes a sip of the coffee and backs out of the kitchen. Tori’s parents are at the dining room table, and Tori’s sister is heading over there now, but since Carly came downstairs, Sam and Cat have moved to the couches with their own plates and coffees. Carly hesitates. She can’t decide if it would be weirder to sit with them, or to sit with Tori’s family.

In the end, Trina is *literally* bristling at her, and Carly decides it's better not to needle an angry werewolf, even if it's a wolf who never changes. She goes and awkwardly sits on the other couch opposite Sam and Cat.

"Hi, Carly!" Cat greets. "How did you sleep?"

"Okay, I guess." Carly sips her coffee and eyes the eggs and bacon on their plates. The pizza from last night feels like *ages* ago, and she's hungry. No hangover stomach for her this morning, thankfully. She realizes she should try to keep up with the conversation. "How about you?"

"Oh, we slept *great!*" Cat says enthusiastically, smiling at Sam, who seems too focused on her food to converse.

"That's good," Carly says, and isn't sure what else to say. Luckily, she sees Jade approaching with a plate of food for her, and moments later, Jade and Tori join them on the couches with their own breakfasts. Jade finds a *Law & Order: SVU* episode that she puts on, which makes Carly perk up.

"Ew, this is what you watch over breakfast?" Trina complains.

"I could put on one of *my* movies instead," Jade replies. It's undeniably a threat, and Trina knows it, since it shuts her up.

Carly finishes her breakfast quickly, and as she takes her plate to the kitchen, she tells Tori, "I'm going to go upstairs and get my stuff out of your sister's room, and then I think I'll call a WeDriveU and go get Freddie."

Tori moves as if to stand up, her mouth still full of food. "Ah'u fur?" she tries to say, but it's muffled by her breakfast. She swallows, and tries again. "Are you sure? I can drive you after I get cleaned up a little."

Carly shakes her head. "No, don't worry about it. I feel the need to get cleaned up myself, so I'll be on my way."

"Make sure you get *everything* out of my room," Trina sneers.

"Just for that, I'm leaving my underwear," Carly can't resist snarking back. She normally wouldn't talk like that to a near stranger whose hospitality she's abusing, but really, she's just treating Trina the way Trina is treating her.

She can hear Tori and Jade snort as Trina's mouth falls open indignantly. Carly begins to walk quickly toward the staircase in case Trina's parents stand up for her.

Sam pipes up, "Oh, yeah, you're lucky Carly got dressed at all. She sleeps naked, you know."

"She *does?*" Cat asks, sounding intrigued.

At the same time, Trina shrieks, "She *does?*"

Carly isn't going to correct anyone. It's not *entirely* inaccurate, though it's not like it's an every night thing. She suppresses a smile, remembering the times she and Sam have been wrapped up in each other, nude, usually after a full moon night.

She heads over to Beck's, where the guys are barely functional, to pick up Freddie, and the two of them drive back to Carly's apartment, where they take showers and change their clothes. At this point, Carly knows she really needs to talk to Sam alone, but she isn't sure how to accomplish that, with Freddie around, and with the probability that their friends will want to spend more time all together.

As she's trying to figure out how to subtly ask Tori if Sam and Cat went home yet, Freddie asks an unexpected question.

"Um, so, how did you know you were gay?"

Carly blinks, lowering her phone. "I'm...not? I'm—"

"No, sorry, you're right, I know. You're bi." It seems like just saying the word is difficult for Freddie, but he manages. "I just meant it as in like, not straight."

"Ah." Freddie's sitting on her couch, while she sits at her little table, and she shifts to face him a little more squarely. She tries to figure out how to answer this question without explicitly talking about her previous relationship with Sam. "Um, well, it wasn't something I wanted. I denied it for a very long time." Freddie nods attentively. "I knew I liked guys. That was always true for me, since I was little. But liking women was something I had to discover. But, um. At a certain point, I had feelings that were too strong to ignore. And I decided not to deny it anymore."

"I see." Freddie looks thoughtful.

"Yeah, so." Carly shrugs. "It's probably different for everybody, but that's how it was for me."

"Uh huh." Freddie leans forward a little. "So, um. Was the person you realized you had feelings for...Sam?" Carly blushes. She can feel it happening, and can't do anything to stop it, but it seems to be enough of an answer because Freddie sits back. "Oh."

"Um, yeah, I'm sorry that we didn't tell you," Carly says quickly.

He blinks. "So she liked you, too?" he asks, though he doesn't sound surprised.

"Yeah," Carly admits. "She liked me first, actually. And then, we were a thing for a while."

Freddie lets out his breath and looks past Carly, clearly thinking. "I don't know how I never saw it before."

"We did our best to keep it a secret. I didn't want Spencer to find out."

Freddie looks at her, surprised. "Spencer? I never got the sense he'd have a problem with anything like that. In fact, I got sort of the opposite sense." His mouth twists in a way Carly

can't quite interpret.

"I didn't think he'd, like, disown me or anything. I just thought maybe he wouldn't let Sam stay over if he knew what we were doing."

"Oh." Freddie's eyebrows rise, and *he's* blushing now.

"I didn't mean—" But she *did* mean, so Carly sighs. "I just thought maybe he'd be concerned about word getting out about Sam and I and that it would make him look bad that he sanctioned our sleepovers, especially when we weren't adults yet. And I *really* didn't want to give up our sleepovers," she admits, because at this point...Freddie knows what they were up to, anyway.

"I bet," he says wryly.

"We were going to tell you," Carly insists. "Right after I turned eighteen. It's just that Italy happened first. And Sam and I couldn't stay together when I moved."

Freddie nods, eyes dropping. "You leaving was hard for everyone."

"I know." Carly doesn't really want to talk about that, though. Her whole experience in Italy, as amazing as it was, is weighed down by everything it represents. She is curious about something, though, and steers the conversation that way. "How did you know it might be Sam?" Granted, Carly thinks it was probably *very* obvious, but she's wondering if Freddie brought this up because he'd already suspected something.

Freddie shrugs. "Like I said, it's obvious, looking back. I don't know why I didn't think about it when you and Sam first came out to me a couple months ago." He looks embarrassed, then says, "Okay, maybe I *did* think about it, a little, but I kept assuming I would've known somehow. But then, I saw the two of you last night...and it hit me. It was the way I remembered you two, back then."

"Yeah," Carly says, unable to keep the wistfulness out of her voice.

"It made me realize the two of you must've figured out you were gay together. Or, you know. Not straight." He corrects himself before Carly can step in. But he looks at her keenly. "The two of you aren't cheating on Cat, are you?"

"No!" Carly says quickly. It's so quick she worries it sounds like a lie. "No, I promise you that. Things are complicated with Sam right now but we are *not* cheating."

"You still love her, don't you?" Carly doesn't want to answer, and presses her lips together, but Freddie seems to read her easily, and nods. "Yeah. I get it."

Carly wonders whether the wistfulness in his voice has to do with her, or maybe Sam. Either way, she's pretty sure she doesn't want to find out. "Um, I'll be back. I have to make a phone call."

"Sure." Freddie yawns. "Maybe I'll rest my eyes while you do that." He stretches out on the couch.

Carly goes outside to the front of her apartment building to call Tori. Now that she's talked to Freddie and revealed something she kept hidden from him for so long, she really needs to talk to Sam.

Tori answers quickly, and skips over a greeting. "Oh, no. You didn't forget something in Trina's room, did you? Because I'm not sure I can get it back."

"No, no. Nothing like that. Are Sam and Cat still there?"

"Oh, good. But, no, they left a little while ago to head back to their apartment. Jade and I had showers and are just hanging out. What's up?"

"I need a favor."

"What kind of favor?" Tori sounds eager to help.

But in the background, Carly can hear Jade mutter, "Here we go."

"Listen, I really need to talk to Sam, but I can't just tell Freddie to go away. And I don't want to just leave him at my apartment with nothing to do. I know that Beck didn't have much to offer him for breakfast and he's probably hungry. Would you guys mind, you know, taking him to get something to eat and maybe to entertain him for a little while?"

She can hear Jade in the background again; she wonders if she's on speakerphone. "How does he feel about disturbing movies?"

"Um. I'm not sure. He'd probably enjoy one?" Carly actually isn't sure that he *would*, but Freddie can advocate for himself.

"Because I'm taking Tori to see a double feature of *Melancholia* and *Antichrist* at the retro theater tonight. We thought about inviting everyone, but if you want, we can just invite the guys so you have time for your chat."

"I mean, I don't think I need the entire evening to talk to Sam. And I was kind of hoping you could take Freddie sooner?"

She can hear Jade sigh, but Tori says quickly, "We can come get him soon!"

"Sure," Jade agrees lazily. "I'll just say I want to talk to him about cinematography."

"Great. Thank you so much! And, you know, I think maybe I'd like to come to the movies tonight?"

"We'll text you the times!" Tori says excitedly. "And I'll text Freddie to invite him to hang out with us."

"Thank you," Carly says again.

"You owe us," she hears Jade say as the call disconnects.

Carly heads back upstairs to find Freddie sitting up and tapping at his phone. “So, what do you want to do while everyone recovers from last night?”

“Um, well actually,” Freddie says, “Tori and Jade just invited me to lunch? I guess Jade wants to talk cameras with me, which is cool. They said you could come if you wanted.”

Carly laughs. “I think I’ll sit this one out and let you and Jade nerd out. Besides, Sam wants me to come help her with some art thing.”

“Ah.” Freddie seems to accept that, and finishes typing something on his phone, but then he squints at her. “Are you posing for Sam?”

“Mind out of the gutter, Benson. Nothing nude is happening.”

“It was just a question.”

“An inappropriate one.”

“You’re right.” He rubs his face. “I definitely need some more coffee.”

“I’m positive Jade will be on the same page.”

Freddie cat naps while they wait for Tori and Jade to come pick him up, and Carly finally texts Sam.

**Hey**

**I need to talk to you**

It takes Sam a few minutes to reply, but to Carly, it feels like an hour.

**Kinda want to talk to you, too**

**After Freddie leaves?**

**No this can’t wait**

**Freddie is going somewhere soon**

**I can be over in like an hour or something?**

**I guess**

**Cat will be here too**

**But she needs to be part of this**

Carly is a little confused about that, but actually, she probably needs to make Cat aware of the boundaries she needs right now, too. Cat overcompensating isn't helping things. It's making Carly feel worse.

**Fine**

**See you soon**

The time it takes for Tori and Jade to pick up Freddie seems excruciating, but eventually, Freddie is on his way, and so is Carly. Traffic is about as bad as it usually is, but Carly's nerves are frayed, and she barely has the patience to navigate the Los Angeles surface streets and freeways to make her way to Sam and Cat's apartment.

When she arrives, Cat answers the door and greets her cheerily. "Hi, Carly!"

"Hi, Cat," she says, and breezes in past her, trying to avoid the hug she knows is coming. She needs to say what she needs to say before anything else happens.

"Hey," Sam nods from the kitchen, pouring herself some coffee. "Want some?"

"No, thank you."

"Have a seat," Cat offers.

"No, I'll stand."

She sees the way Sam and Cat exchange a glance, and then Sam tries to say, "So, look, we wanted to—"

"I need to say something first," Carly says firmly. Sam looks surprised, and Cat looks curious. Carly knows she isn't exactly known for being insistent, demanding, at least not without provocation. Well, she had enough provocation last night. "We need boundaries," she begins.

"We can talk about that," Sam starts, "But—"

"Don't interrupt me." Sam looks truly shocked this time, and she walks over to lean against the back of the couch, coffee cup in hand, though it's as if she's forgotten she's holding it,

because she doesn't lift it to her mouth once as Carly speaks. "What happened last night...I can't take it." She shakes her head. "You both know how I feel about you, Sam." She throws her hands up. "I still love you. I can't help it, but I do. And I know that you have Cat, that you love *her*, and I'm trying my best to respect that, but you being all over me last night, you acting like you did years ago, and Cat..." She turns to look at her, shaking her head. "You don't *have* to like me."

"But I do like you!" Cat bursts out in surprise.

Carly sighs heavily. "I like you, too, but the way you overcompensate for what's happening with Sam and I by trying to get closer...it's a lot. It's hard for me. You don't need to make me like you more for me to see you're not the enemy. I already know that."

Cat looks surprised and a little hurt, and that alone seems to make Sam's temper flare a little. "Now hold on," she begins hotly.

"Sam, *please*. I'm trying to tell you that you're *right*. I get now why you couldn't be around me. It's too hard. It's too painful." She drops her eyes. "I hate being there, right next to you, *loving* you, with no way to express any of those feelings. I'm tired of bottling everything up. I can't turn off my feelings and they're *killing* me." Carly's eyes are flooded with tears, and she blinks rapidly, trying to will them away, but they just keep flowing. She holds her hands in front of her, sensing that both women she's talking to are about to approach her, to offer comfort, and she absolutely *cannot* deal with that right now. "So we need to not see each other anymore."

"Carls," Sam starts, voice pained. "It doesn't have to be this way."

"Please don't call me that," Carly manages tearfully.

Oddly, Sam looks even more hurt by that than anything else Carly has said. She looks helplessly at Cat, who says tentatively, "Carly? Can we talk to you about something?"

Carly laughs bitterly and throws up her hands. "Why not?" she says harshly. "I don't know what there is left to talk about, but sure, talk to me."

Cat looks over at Sam again, who places her coffee cup down on the end table next to the couch and takes a small step closer to Carly. Carly feels herself bristle, and Sam obviously senses it, too. Sam takes a breath and looks at Carly. "Maybe this doesn't matter now, but we wanted to talk to you because...we've talked about it, and we think it would be best to stop pretending we aren't in love."

This doesn't make any sense to Carly and she just stares at Sam. "What?" She starts to think about it, and then says, "That's what I mean. That's why we can't be around each other. I don't even care if we tell all our friends why but that's what we should do. Freddie knows now, anyway."

"He—wait—back up. Freddie knows?"



Carly sighs and rubs her face. “It hardly matters now, but yes. He figured it out by watching us last night. Probably *no one* will be surprised. So yeah, you’re right. It’s time to stop pretending.”

Sam steps closer, seemingly without thinking. Carly doesn’t even react this time because she’s too goddamn devastated by the clarity of their situation, by the fact that Sam isn’t even fighting her about this, just how *obvious* it is that they shouldn’t see each other, for however long it takes to stop loving each other. But Carly has wondered for a long time if it’s even possible. Even in Italy, with the handful of guys and girls she’d tried to distract herself with, her love for Sam had never faded.

She thinks, darkly, about the long-term prospects of this. Maybe they could come together as friends in the future, but would it ever be the same? It *can’t* ever be the same, not when even the very basis of their friendship is the tenuous push and pull of deeper emotion, when everything platonic between them has been recolored by romance. They will have to be separate for so long, will they even miss each other when the fires of their unrequited love burn out? Will they even remember each other? They might be in very different places in their lives by the time they figure out how to handle this.

Or maybe Sam and Cat might implode and Sam will come looking for her. But Carly doesn’t think she wants to be second best, second choice, when Sam has always been her first.

In essence, Carly realizes, she’s saying goodbye to Sam. And it’s all she can do to not sob her heart out.

Sam is standing in front of her now, her eyes, those almost indescribably blue eyes, meeting Carly’s with an almost unbearable intensity, and she says quietly, “There’s another way to stop pretending.”

Carly can’t make sense of what she’s saying. “But we *can’t*.”

Sam maintains a steady gaze. “Maybe we *can*.”

“But.” Carly looks helplessly over at Cat, who watches the two of them with a serene smile.

Sam follows her gaze and smiles at her girlfriend. “Cat and I decided we were tired of pretending, too. We thought it made more sense to just...embrace it.”

“And you’re *okay* with this?” Carly asks Cat, still making sense of what Sam is suggesting.

Cat nods eagerly. “Oh, definitely,” she assures Carly.

Carly looks back at Sam. She’s unable to be hopeful about this. She must be misunderstanding something. “You want to embrace this...*how*?”

Sam smiles. It’s one of those rare, soft smiles that for a long time were just for Carly. “As in...I can be with you, but I can still have Cat. If that’s okay with you.”

Carly’s first reaction is to be absolutely *thrilled*. She and Sam can be together? This is *really* happening, this is really *allowed*? “I—oh my god.” But then she starts to wonder about how

this would work. How can Sam have *both* of them? How will Carly feel about having to *share* Sam? Is it really the best option, or will it just lead to more heartache? “I...yes, god yes, I want this, I want *you*, but...I don’t understand. I don’t know how this will work, I don’t think it *can* work. Why would Cat want this? What’s in it for her?”

Cat stands up. “I want the people I love to be happy,” she says succinctly. “And you two make each other happy. And so do Sam and I. And maybe...” she trails off.

But it seems she simply loses her nerve, because Sam says, “We thought maybe...you and Cat. If you’re into that.”

“Me and—” Carly stops herself from laughing at the sheer unexpectedness of the scenario. “Wait, what?”

Cat seems to find her voice and speaks quietly. “I’ve had feelings for you for a while.” Carly looks at her in surprise, and Cat meets her eyes, her hopeful warm, dark gaze meeting Carly’s. “You thought I was just being too nice. But it’s like I forgot how to be *normal* around you because my crush was *so intense*.” She drops her eyes. “I’m sorry if I was too much. I know I can be like that sometimes.”

“You’re *never* too much,” Sam assures her quickly, making Cat smile.

“You had a crush on me?” Carly repeats the only part of this that has registered in her brain.

“*Have*,” Cat corrects her with a shy smile. “And...at this point it might be more than a crush.”

Carly is dumbfounded. She’s gone from being hopelessly lonely and wondering if she might ever fall in love again to...having her best friend-turned-lover-turned-ex-girlfriend who she’s still in love with propose some kind of threesome with her girlfriend who Carly likes very much but has *never* considered *that* way...

She’s speechless, and looks to Sam for some kind of help.

Sam shrugs with a small smile. “She’s really been crushing *hard* for a while. She was having an easier time with loving two people than I was for a long time.”

“Loving...I...” Carly can’t fully wrap her mind around this, but her heart sinks, because it feels like she *almost* had what she wanted within her grasp, but...it’s *not* quite what she wants.

She wants Sam. She *loves* Sam. And a part of her wanted to think, wanted to believe that she could handle loving Sam even if she had to share her with Cat, but...

Carly’s not in love with Cat. Sure, she thinks Cat is attractive, in her own way, but...she’s never *thought* about Cat that way. And if she needs to accept Cat in order to have Sam...

This isn’t going to work.

Carly sighs heavily, already feeling the tears welling up. “I’m so sorry, but...I don’t feel the same way. About Cat.” She takes a step toward the door. “So I’m afraid I can’t do this with you two, and maybe it would be best to just...” She can’t even bring herself to say it.

She can’t quite bring herself to break the hearts of everyone in the room.

-

That...hurts to hear. It’s a punch to the gut that reverberates through her, then stings sharply, then aches deeply.

So Carly only has eyes for Sam. Well. A part of Cat had known it might be a bit of a long shot for Carly to love her, too. But she’d been *hopeful*. In her fantasies, the three of them would be so overcome with love for each other that it would overpower all the other logistical details—like jealousy, or time management.

In her fantasies, her love for Sam and Carly felt like it could become so equivalent, that she could only imagine that love being returned in the same fashion.

But Carly doesn’t love her.

And rejection *hurts*.

The weight of her fantasies crashing down around her makes Cat feel wildly out of control, angry, frustrated, like she wants to burn everything down with them. But she looks at Sam, who is looking back at her, gaze full of love and concern and sympathy and...*hope*.

And Cat takes a breath.

She *loves* Sam. Sam, who always promises to choose her, who she can tell is prepared to do so, right now, much as she doesn’t want to. Cat had told her once that she shouldn’t *have* to choose, and she wants so badly to be able to be that benevolent right now.

Sam has made it clear in so many ways that she would do anything for Cat. And now is Cat’s chance to do the same for her.

And for Carly. Because even if it’s not returned, Cat still loves her, too.

Cat reminds herself that she meant it when she said she wants the people she loves to be happy. And so, even as it feels like stabbing herself in her own ribs, she swallows down her disappointment, and chooses love.

“It’s okay,” she says, trying for upbeat, though her throat is tight as she mourns what was never to be, what only exists in her imagination. “I still want you two to have each other.”

Sam’s shoulders sag slightly in relief. Carly’s mouth drops open and she stares at Cat in awe. “What?” Carly asks.

Sam doesn’t appear prepared to just take Cat at her word, though. “Babe. Are you *sure*?” she asks, tone weighty, significant.

Cat takes another breath. Why does it have to be so hard to do the right thing? “Yes,” she says, and this time, there’s conviction in her tone. “I meant when I said I want the people I love to be happy.” And it’s true. She *had* meant it. And she’s trying to still mean it now.

Sam looks at her, then looks back at Carly, who is still staring at Cat like she’s a creature Carly has never seen before, something more mystical and miraculous than even a werewolf. The scrutiny makes Cat blush, a little, and she looks away, back toward Sam, who is gazing at Carly with affection and optimism.

Carly looks hesitant, but also eager, excited, like a kid on Christmas morning about to open a big present but concerned it actually contains a prank inside. “I *want* to believe you, but...”

“Believe me,” Cat assures her. “I want you both to have this.” It’s getting easier to convince herself as she tries to convince them.

“Like I said,” Sam says quietly, “Cat has been able to understand the boundlessness of love for a lot longer than I have.”

Carly looks back at Sam. “I can really...have you?” she asks, her voice breaking.

“Yeah,” Sam nods, mouth lifting slightly in a smile. “I’m all yours.” She glances at Cat. “And all hers,” she amends.

Carly glances between them. “I’ll...figure out the logistics of that later. Oh, *Sam!*” And she flings herself into Sam’s arms.

Sam wraps her arms around Carly slowly, as if she can’t quite believe it’s happening, and closes her eyes. Cat can hear her take in a deep breath as they just hold each other.

Cat feels a squeezing in her chest, a loving ache at the sweetness of the moment, and a twinging one at the pain of being left out, rejected. It’s a difficult line to walk, a challenging dual mindset to hold, but her reality is the conjunction, the juxtaposition, of celebratory joy for people she cares about, and a wistful jealousy.

And as the two of them finally pull back just enough to share a kiss, Cat begins to fully realize just how much things are going to change.

She hears Carly whimper into the kiss as she melts into Sam, sees the way Sam’s fingers change their grip on Carly’s back, holding her closer, watches as Sam tilts her head, inviting Carly to deepen their kiss. Cat can read all the desperation, the nostalgia and need in their connection, can feel the resolution, the satisfaction, the power of repressed desire finally being given an outlet, the exchange of affection and love and the pain and fear of loss exchanged between them. It’s potent and raw, and Cat is both an interloper and the arbiter of their connection, feeling both swept up in the beauty of their reconnection, and completely removed from it.

It takes her a moment to realize she’s trembling, and she looks away, unable to watch anymore as Sam and Carly get lost in each other. She can no longer see them, though the sight of them kissing is forever burned into her memory, seared by the heat of her own

jealousy, the power of her desire for them both. But she can still *hear* them as she averts her gaze, hear the soft chuckles and sighs of their emotional release, hear the light press of lips, the sound of hands moving over fabric.

Cat quickly strides over to the kitchen, opening the fridge and staring inside of it mindlessly, then moving over to the stove to pick up a pot and begin filling it with water.

“Cat?” Sam asks, then, “Babe? What are you doing?”

“I just thought maybe we should have some lunch,” Cat says briskly. “I can make pasta, or, I don’t know, heat up some soup, whatever you want.”

She’s met with silence for a moment, but she isn’t really waiting for an answer, her head is back in the fridge, and she’s trying to make sense of the jumble of information her eyes are taking in. Grapes, lunchmeat, eggs, lettuce, chicken breast, apple juice, strawberry jam, pasta sauce, milk, leftover noodles, root beer, butter, Swiss cheese—

“I think you’d better go,” she hears Sam say quietly.

“No, no,” Cat turns, mouth stretched into a smile, but she can tell immediately from the expressions on her girlfriend and *her* girlfriend’s faces that she must look...*maniacal*. “No, why don’t you stay for lunch?” she asks. She can’t bring herself to say Carly’s name.

“I appreciate the offer,” Carly replies evenly, “But I’m not very hungry.”

“Oh, well, I can send something home with you!” Cat insists.

“That’s really very kind,” Carly placates. “But I’m going to head home. I’ll talk to you later?” That last bit is directed toward Sam, the inflection of the question slight, subtle.

“Definitely,” Sam tells her, and Cat looks away as *that* beaming smile crosses Sam’s face.

The beaming smile that used to be only *hers*.

“Okay, well, drive safe!” Cat says as Carly leaves. Her tone is much *louder* than she intends it to be, almost aggressive. She looks toward Sam, not quite *at* her, and asks, “What are you hungry for?”

“I don’t really want anything,” Sam tells her quietly, crossing the living room toward the kitchen.

Cat laughs. It’s high and false and frantic. “Oh, that’s a lie, you always have an appetite for *something*. Come on, Sam,” she says, tone bordering on harsh. “Tell me what you want, let me make something for you.”

“Cat,” Sam says delicately, standing just next to the refrigerator.

“*What?*” Cat turns to face her, alarmed by the tears she feels on her cheeks.

“Come here,” Sam says, holding out her arms.

“I don’t *want*—” Cat starts hotly.

“*Come here*,” Sam says more insistently, edging closer.

“*No*, I’m trying to—” Cat insists as she feels Sam’s arms close around her. She struggles, briefly, but then abruptly, before she can even make sense of it, she’s limp, being held up by her girlfriend, wailing and sobbing onto her chest and shoulder.

Sam merely holds her, a sturdy presence with strong arms and a comforting quietude. She doesn’t say anything as she guides Cat back to their bedroom, coaxes her onto her bed, and gets down right beside her to hold her close as Cat continues to cry. She still doesn’t say anything, but then, what would Cat expect her to say? ‘I’m sorry’? Of course she’s not sorry, she has exactly what she wants. ‘It’s okay’? Will it ever be again?

“It hurts,” Cat finally manages.

“I know,” Sam answers quietly.

Cat burrows her face closer to Sam’s neck, feels a jolt of rage at the memory of Carly doing much the same thing, only minutes before. Maybe it’s a blessing that she’s not a werewolf, so that she wouldn’t have to smell Carly *all over Sam*...

Cat sucks in a breath, trying to quell her anger, because it’s *not* her, it’s not what she wants to be.

“I’m sorry. I hate this,” she whispers.

“Don’t be sorry. I get it,” Sam says quietly.

“*Do you?*” Cat pulls away, trying to look at her, scowling.

Sam looks hesitant, and her face is largely stoic, and finally she says, “Maybe better than anyone else, because I know what it feels like to have Carly Shay break your heart.”

“But you also know what it feels like to have her *love* you,” Cat utters petulantly, pressing close to Sam more because she doesn’t want to look at her than because she wants her comfort right now.

“Yeah,” Sam finally agrees, sounding reluctant. “But that’s only because I have you, and you’re amazing enough to *let* us.”

“I don’t feel very amazing right now,” Cat hisses.

They’re both quiet for a long time as they continue to hold each other. Cat focuses on breathing, and slowly allows herself to press closer to Sam, to allow the warmth of Sam and the pressure of her embrace comfort her.

She doesn’t know what else to say, doesn’t know if there *is* anything else to say. She feels like she made a horrible mistake, but it doesn’t feel possible to take it back now.

Still, she's surprised when Sam finally says, in a hesitant voice, heavy with reluctance, "We don't *have* to do this."

And despite the thoughts Cat had just been having, her reaction is instantaneous. "No. You do," she states plainly.

"I just don't want to *hurt* you. And I'm sure Carly doesn't, either."

"I don't—I'm not—" Cat tries, then sighs heavily. "Of course it hurts. But it wouldn't be very fair of me to say I want you both to be happy and then take that away just because I'm feeling left out."

"It's also not very fair of us to leave you out," Sam responds slowly.

"*You're* not leaving me out," Cat nuzzles her lover's shoulder.

"Yeah," Sam agrees, hugging her closer.

They're quiet for a while longer, until Cat finally sits up, wanting to actually express herself. "This is so hard. Because I *want* to be the kind of person who can let you and Carly love each other, but it *sucks*. It feels *awful*. I thought this would be easier." She shakes her head. "This isn't how I thought it would go," she says in a small voice.

Sam sits next to her, listening, but Cat can see that, behind the concern on her face, Sam is *glowing*. Sam has just won the girlfriend lottery, she should be across town spending *hours* kissing the girl she's loved for longer than she's known Cat, but...here she is, listening to Cat be miserable about her own joyous circumstances.

"I'm sorry," Cat says quietly. "This isn't fair to you, either."

Sam shrugs, taking a deep breath. "None of this is really very fair, for any of us. But I guess that's just kinda how love can be sometimes."

"I *want* you two to be happy," Cat insists. "I just keep waiting to stop feeling so...bitter."

Sam takes her hand. "And right now, I'm just going to be with you to support you."

Cat shakes her head. "You should go and be with Carly." She can see Sam shake her head, and then something occurs to her. "Oh. You can't. Because Freddie is there."

Sam nods. "Right." She takes Cat's other hand. "But you...you let us reconnect. And I'm really, really grateful for that."

Cat presses her mouth together. "You both looked so happy," she says wistfully. "This whole thing—" she begins abruptly, "This feels like this isn't a good start for all of this. I should be happier. I should be able to handle this."

"It's okay to feel bad," Sam tells her. "We'll figure this out," she says, forcefully optimistic. "We'll just take things slow. As slow as you need."

Cat doesn't *want* them to have to take things slow. She doesn't want to feel like she's standing in the way of something the two of them both want *intensely*.

But she also realizes that, right now, taking things slow is what needs to happen, anyway, if for no other reason than the fact that Freddie's visit prevents Sam and Carly from being alone, together.

"Okay," Cat finally agrees, because there's nothing else to say. "What do you want for lunch?" she asks, pushing past the topic, ready to stop thinking about all of it for a while.

"I want to go pick up Mexican food so that you don't have to make anything," Sam says decisively. She smiles invitingly. "Want to come with me?"

"If you'll have me," Cat answers, feeling herself reflect a smile back at Sam.

"Always," Sam tells her, and her tone feels like a promise.

-

Carly barely remembers the drive back to her apartment because she's in a complete haze. Nothing feels real as she parks her little VW Bug and begins to gradually make her way to her apartment. She lets herself in and dazedly steps over to her couch, sinking down onto it slowly and staring at her blank TV screen.

"Did that *really* just happen?" she asks herself aloud.

It isn't the first time she's posed the question to herself. As she'd navigated ever-present traffic on her drive home (traffic that had barely registered even though it probably made up half of her journey), she'd spoken it rhetorically to no one in her car. There was even a stretch of the 405 in which she'd just *laughed* about her circumstances as she inched along in standstill traffic, feeling like everything and nothing was real.

It doesn't quite feel like a dream, it doesn't exactly feel like something she might wake up from. It more feels like a *mistake*, a misunderstanding. If Carly laughs about it, if Carly treats it with the absurdity it deserves, maybe it won't take her off-guard when Sam calls her later and tells her that nothing can happen, that they made a mistake, that the kiss they shared actually means nothing.

*Oh god.* She and Sam had *kissed*. Right in front of Cat!

*That* part feels more dream-like than anything. Like if Carly lets herself dwell on the memory too much, it might slip away, gauzy and ethereal and pretend.

But no. The memory of the sensation of Sam's lips on hers is *too real*. The *smell* of her, so achingly tangible, on her own skin is concrete evidence, *proof* that this happened.

Carly realizes she's giggling again, less in disbelief and more in pure *elation*, as reality settles over her. Sam's lips against hers. Sam's eyes, Sam's smile. The way she could *feel* the difference in the way Sam loves her, no longer tormented, but *joyful*, their agony resolved.



The moment Sam told her that Carly could *have* her.

It's completely overwhelming.

Carly realizes the couch she's sitting on smells like Freddie, which is *jarring* in this moment when she's trying to recall every tiny detail of the kisses she shared with Sam. Instead, she flops onto her bed and shrieks into her pillow, letting out as much excess energy as she can before flipping over onto her back and staring at her ceiling, letting her mind wander again.

Sam is *hers*. Sam is *hers* and somehow also...*Cat's*.

What does it *mean*?

To be honest, Carly is trying not to think about Cat. Cat's distress had been obvious and honestly? Carly could relate. Hadn't she spent the last six months in a similar position, feeling jealous and left out and heartbroken because of Sam's relationship with Cat?

Except that...Cat still *has* Sam. But Cat had also been very clear that she wants *her*, too, and Carly supposes that she can't really relate to how it might feel to be separate from...that kind of a romantic...group dynamic...if that was something she might want to be part of.

It's a little overwhelming to consider, to be honest.

She just wishes she could talk to *Sam*. Because she has no idea what to expect with *any* of this.

For now, though, she just thinks about Sam, and all the possibilities that are now suddenly blooming between them. Just the *idea* that they can pick up where they left off, over a year and a half ago. And that Carly can do things *right* this time. No more secrets. She wants *everyone* to know just how much she loves Sam Puckett and all her glorious weirdness.

Carly *is* still exhausted from the party the night before, so now that she's lying down, she's really not inclined to move. She lets her thoughts drift to Sam (as they have *so many* times before, with her on this very bed), letting memories flood over her, not just of this kiss but of years' worth of encounters, of all the times she'd kissed her ardently under the full moon, of all the times in later years, when they'd made love with equal parts ferocity and tenderness, overcome with desire, overwhelmed with love.

Carly lies so still that she drifts in and out of sleep, memory and fantasy becoming dreams, startlingly realistic yet tinged with the absurd, and Carly floats there for an undetermined amount of time, head full of Sam, heart full of her first love, the one that never really left her, now achingly sweet, requited, yet still unresolved.

She's half awake and fantasizing dreamily about having Sam beneath her, hand between her legs, recalling the way Sam sounds when she's being touched, the way she writhes, the way she holds onto Carly, the way Carly swears she can almost see the wolf in her clear blue eyes when their passion is inflamed.

The tingling in her body turns to a more acute sensation, and Carly starts letting her hand slowly slip up her shirt, already slightly more awake. In her hazy, sleepy state, it feels like it won't take much at all to get off, but Carly hesitates, only because she's not quite sure she wants to wake up enough to actually masturbate. She could just keep floating here, with her thoughts.

She's jarred completely out of her drowsy doze by a firm knock at the door.

"*Jesus*," Carly breathes, sitting up with a swiftness that belies her human visage, hand pressed against her heart to feel its rapid beats. Just as she's about to ask who it is, she realizes she knows: she can smell Freddie, *actual* Freddie, not just the hint of him on her furniture. Why is it so easy to forget about Freddie sometimes? "Hang on," she calls, getting up to unlock her door.

"Hey," Freddie greets her casually with a grin as he comes back in.

"You scared the *hell* out of me," Carly tells him.

His eyebrows lift. "Sorry? I texted you that I was coming back."

"I was napping—oh," Carly picks up her phone, which she'd left on the couch, and apparently had slept through Freddie's text from twenty minutes ago informing her that he was getting a ride back with Jade and Tori.

And also a text from Sam. From about ten minutes ago.

**Hey**

**Kinda can't stop thinking about you**

Carly can't fight the grin that's fully stretching across her mouth. She can *feel* her heart quickening.

"Uh, I know you're not *that* happy to see that I texted you," Freddie drawls meaningfully.

"Sorry. One second," Carly tells him, answering Sam right then and there.

**Honestly I don't think I've thought of anything else**

"What's going on?" Freddie asks suspiciously, sitting down on the couch slowly, keen eyes on Carly.

Carly giggles, completely involuntarily, part from sheer joy and part from nerves. She tries to think up a lie, but when it comes down to it, she simply doesn't have the wherewithal to even start *thinking* of a convincing lie.

She shouldn't tell Freddie, though. She could just tell him it's nothing and he shouldn't worry about it. He wouldn't like it, but she knows he respects her enough to let her have her privacy if she demands it.

But. She also really, *really* wants to tell him. Because the idea of keeping this to herself feels *impossible*, and maybe speaking it aloud will make it feel more real. "It's...it's Sam," she finally says.

"Uh *huh*," Freddie answers slowly, eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Sam," he deadpans, flat gaze on Carly, clearly giving her a chance to explain herself before he jumps to his worst conclusions.

"Freddie, it's..." Carly sits next to him on the couch, facing him. He watches expectantly as Carly tries to figure out how to even *begin* to explain this. "It's not what you think," she starts with.

Freddie's mouth thins. "I'm *so* glad you started there," he starts sarcastically. "Good explanations *always* start with caveats like that."

"Yeah, that was not my best attempt to explain this," Carly agrees with a wince. "But I'm being serious. I know how this looks. But it's—everything is *okay*."

"With you, or with Sam and Cat?" he asks pointedly.

Carly has to hesitate, because she knows the state Cat was in when she left, and the memory of Cat's anguish sets her teeth on edge. "Let me just start from the beginning," she implores.

Freddie nods imploringly, expression shifting to something more neutral, clearly trying to make an effort to withhold judgment.

"I actually went over to see Sam today to tell her we couldn't be friends anymore," Carly states quietly, eyes dropping to the ground. Thinking back to her mood earlier today, in contrast with how she feels *now*, is jarring. Painfully so. She'd been *so certain* that she was saying goodbye to Sam, possibly forever. And now...

Freddie is clearly waiting for her to say more, but when she pauses, he says, "That sounds really hard."

"It *was*," Carly says. "You know how much she's meant to me for so many years. Even before our relationship. But." She shakes her head. "I still can hardly believe this. When I went over there to try to talk to her, she and Cat wanted to talk to me. And it turned out they wanted to talk to me because...they had decided that Sam and I can be together."

Freddie's eyes go wide. "Cat just...*broke up with Sam for you*?"

“No,” Carly shakes her head. “That’s the part that’s kind of blowing my mind. Sam and Cat are still together. But. So are Sam and I.”

“Wait, wait,” Freddie waves a hand in front of his face. “Wait,” he says again. He blinks a few times. “You can *do* that?” he finally asks in awe.

Carly shrugs. “I guess so. We’re certainly going to try.” She decides to leave out the part about Cat wanting something from her, too. That doesn’t seem fair, to openly discuss Cat’s heartbreak and disappointment.

“But then,” Freddie says, frowning, clearly trying to make sense of what he’s being told. “Okay, so then, Sam has *two* girlfriends?”

Carly laughs. “I guess so.”

“And you and Cat are *okay* with that?” He sounds like he’s in total disbelief on this point.

“I mean, I know I am,” Carly explains. “I’ve been seeing for a long time just how good Sam and Cat are for each other. I’m just grateful they’re willing to let me have what I want, too. Because all I want is Sam. I’ve...I’ve wanted her for *so long*...” she trails off.

“But *why* would *Cat* be okay with this?” Freddie challenges.

“She—she wants Sam and I to be happy.” Carly falters a bit in her explanation, because it’s *so* complicated and there’s only so much she’s willing to say.

Freddie tilts his head to the side. “That doesn’t make any sense,” he says bluntly. “What does Cat *get* out of this?”

“I...” Carly starts, but finds she has no good answer. “I actually don’t know,” she admits.

Freddie looks concerned. “This doesn’t seem okay,” he says gently. “Are you *sure* this is really happening?”

“Yes!” Carly insists.

“How?” Freddie asks.

“Because the way Sam just texted me, we’re *definitely* still on.”

“Then why aren’t you over there with her right now?” Freddie questions, tone almost provocative.

“Because—” Carly’s mouth twists. “Because I think the *reality* of it...was a little more to process than Cat thought.”

“*Ah*,” Freddie says, in an annoyingly superior tone.

“But she *insists* she wants us to have this,” Carly tells him hotly, beginning to get irritated by his condescension. Why does Freddie *always* think he’s so much smarter than everyone else?

*Probably*, Carly thinks, *Because he usually is*. But that doesn't mean he's right this time.

"I *know* how it sounds, but *I was there*, and I know what Cat told me," Carly insists.

"Okay, okay," Freddie holds up his hands. "Look, I'm sorry if you feel like I'm doubting you. It's not that I think you're lying, or mistaken. It's that I don't want to see you get hurt."

"I'm a big girl," Carly fires back. "I can make my own choices about who I love."

"I get that." Freddie rubs his face. "I feel like nothing either of us are saying is coming out right."

Carly sighs heavily, letting go of some of her frustration. "You're right," she agrees.

"It's just that..." Freddie starts. Carly is already bristling, because Freddie never did know when to stop talking. "I could understand it if it were like, you, Sam and Cat as like a *triad*. I've heard of that. It's weird but at least it's balanced. But like. I can't make sense of you and Cat just...constantly jostling for your half of Sam like a divorced couple trading off custody of your kids."

"I..." Truthfully, Carly *hasn't* thought much about this aspect, precisely because this is the part that is so confusing for her. "I don't think it's going to be like that. Cat and I are friends."

"Yeah," Freddie agrees. "But what if your friendship can't sustain sharing a girlfriend?"

Carly hates when Freddie is right, especially when she'd been so sure he wasn't. "Okay, but this has *just* started. Maybe give us a chance to figure some things out first. I don't even really know how we're going to do everything yet."

"Well, you told me, so, I'm just giving you my opinion," Freddie states.

"And I appreciate your concern, and now you can stop," Carly says bluntly.

"I hear you." Freddie holds up his hands. "I've got to..." he gestures vaguely toward the bathroom. He *still* can't talk aloud about certain basic private things with Carly, including literally going to the bathroom.

"Have fun," she tells him, mildly sarcastic. She glances down at her phone to realize she's gotten another couple of texts from Sam while she's been talking to Freddie.

**I want to talk more but**

**we should keep it just over text tonight**

**Since you're still hosting Freddie**

**and tbh Cat needs more time to process this**

Carly doesn't *love* how much Cat is clearly struggling with this and she really hopes Freddie's prediction isn't accurate. As much as it's a dream come true to have a chance to be with Sam again after so much heartbreak, she doesn't want it to come at the cost of, well... everything falling apart between the three of them.

But ultimately, putting Sam and Cat's relationship to the test was not her decision, and won't be her responsibility to maintain.

**Yeah that makes sense**

**Btw I told Freddie about all this**

It only seems fair that Sam should know this. The answer is immediate.

**Why?????**

**Because I didn't think I could keep it to myself**

**Because I needed it to be real**

**Besides, Freddie can keep a secret**

**Since we probably need some time to figure**

**out how to roll this out**

**Because I don't want you to be my secret this time**

Carly wants to be clear about that.

**Yeah I don't want that either**

**I get it**

**I mean I can at least talk to Cat**

**You need somebody too**

**Tell him to keep his mouth shut tho**  
**I'm not so invested in school that I wouldn't**  
**drive up to his fancy nerd school**  
**and beat his ass**

Freddie is already finished in the bathroom and warily approaching Carly on the couch. Carly glances up at him. "Can you keep what I told you secret for now? We're still figuring out how we want to tell people."

Freddie looks concerned, but nods gravely. "My lips are sealed."

"Good. Because otherwise Sam says she'll beat your ass."

Freddie rolls his eyes. "I'd love to see her try," he says, though there's a slight waver in his voice that betrays his lack of confidence.

**Freddie will keep quiet**

**I have a lot of questions**

**Like about how we're going to do this**

**But mostly I'm just so glad you're mine**

**Just hearing you say that is**

**I dunno**

**Everything**

**Cat and i still have a lot to talk about**

**but we'll figure it all out**

Carly wants to just text with Sam nonstop for the rest of the night, but she knows that isn't really a possibility for either of them. So she just sends a heart emoji and turns her attention back to Freddie. "So, what did you and Jade talk about?" she asks.

She and Freddie chat for a little while and later that night, the whole group of them, minus Sam and Cat, who both have homework, go to the retro theater to see the double feature Jade

had talked about earlier. The movies are disturbing, but Carly can barely focus on them. Afterwards, they go to a diner for late night coffee and Carly accidentally orders a surprisingly good vegan breakfast platter. That's what she gets for paying too much attention to her phone.

Because all through her evening out with her friends, every buzz of Carly's phone in her pocket feels like a secret, and it's both thrilling and gut-wrenching to have a secret she wishes she didn't have to keep, even temporarily. She gets up during the movies just enough times to go to the lobby to check her phone that Jade starts to get irritated with her.

Turns out most of those buzzes aren't even texts from Sam, but that means fewer opportunities for her to grin at her phone like a lunatic and let someone *else* guess that she has something going on.

She falls asleep with her phone in her hand, texting sporadically with her *girlfriend*, trying not to think too much about how she's getting ready for bed with her *other* girlfriend, and probably cuddling her, comforting her, in the wake of Carly's newfound ecstasy.

-

As absurd as it seems to have to worry about something stupid like *college* right now, Sam and Cat have to shift the focus of their evening to homework. Well, Cat does, anyway. She has a test in her class tomorrow, whereas Sam doesn't have much of anything. She's expected to have made a little more progress on her current painting, and that's about it.

All Sam wants to do is talk to Carly.

But she also knows how tenuous this situation is. She and Cat still have things to talk about once emotions die down, and with homework and just the realities of existence, there isn't really time for either of them to process much of anything, much less talk about things.

So, for now, Carly is across town, presumably with Freddie, and Sam is here, setting up the same array of Cat's stuffed animals on their couch that constitute the "portrait" she's painting for class, trying to focus on their big-eyed, squishy faces when all she can think about is Carly's face.

Carly's dark eyes, the way they crinkle with laughter. Her hair, the way she always gets it to fall *just so* past her shoulders, in a way that looks effortless. Her lips, the way they stretch into such a big smile.

The way they feel pressed against her own, so soft and pliable. The way it felt to *kiss* her again, for the first time in so long, and how everything in Sam was so keenly aware of how *familiar* it felt to kiss someone she'd kissed so thoroughly for so many years of her life, yet was *jarringly* different from kissing Cat.

And even if she and Cat still have a lot to talk about, Sam knows that she can't just ignore Carly all night, either. So she at least reaches out to her, to let her know she's thinking about her, even if there's more that needs to be worked out while they figure out how this is even going to *go*...she wants to make sure Carly doesn't feel forgotten.



Sam knows what that feels like. She doesn't wish that on anyone.

A little later in the afternoon, Jade texts to invite her and Cat to go to the movies with the group. Cat seems to be absorbed in her work, so Sam cautiously interrupts her. "Um, babe?"

"Yeah?" Cat asks, sounding distracted, but not irritated.

"Did you see Jade texted us about going to the movies tonight with everybody?"

"No," Cat answers. She picks up her PearPhone, glances at it, and sets it down again. "I think I'm going to be way too busy studying tonight."

"Yeah, okay," Sam accepts. "I don't have too much more to do with my homework."

"That's good," Cat says absently. Sam watches her for a moment. Cat seems to get immediately absorbed back into her homework, and doesn't say anything else.

On the one hand, Sam *kind of* really wants to go to the movies. Not just because she likes to go see weird movies that Jade recommends, but because *Carly* will be there.

But Cat hasn't told her to just go ahead and go see the movies, something Sam would expect from her under normal circumstances. And Sam can't tell if it's because she's not even really thinking about it, or if it's because Cat doesn't *want* her to go.

Either way, Sam isn't going to push it.

She texts Jade back.

**We can't make it**

**Homework**

**Too bad**

**These movies are deeply fucked up**

**and right up your alley**

**Next time for sure**

**Whatever**

Sam knows that Jade isn't really upset, it's just how she communicates. She *is* kind of disappointed to sit this one out, but...she thinks it also makes sense. It probably would make Cat feel left out and *extra* rejected if Sam left to go hang out with Carly right now, when Cat's emotions are still so fragile.

Even if there's also no chance of even *kissing* Carly in a group setting like this. Sam still wishes she could see her.

And she also understands that she needs to stay home.

And when she thinks about it...she also *wants* to stay home. For Cat's sake. And also for her own. Because honoring Cat right now is important to her, and she knows that even if she *did* go out tonight, she'd end up spending the whole evening thinking and worrying about her girlfriend. *Cat*. Since she guesses she has *two* of those right now...

But though she knows she's made the right choice, the heart always seems to want most what it can't have. Which means that, by choosing *not* to be around Carly tonight, she's all Sam can think about.

The two of them text sporadically through the evening. On the one hand, Sam *is* trying to actually make some progress on her painting, though she's probably already done enough work on it to satisfy her professor. She also knows that Carly is in a movie theater where she can't exactly check her phone; Jade's preferred experience is theaters where they throw you out for looking at a phone. And besides, if they want to be discreet while they figure these things out, distracting Carly in a group of their friends isn't a great idea.

Nor is Sam getting so swept up in a conversation that she feels inaccessible to Cat.

Cat never does say anything else about the movies they miss seeing that night, but later on, they eat dinner together and get ready for bed together. Cat is quieter than usual, and Sam responds to that by joining her in her bed so she can curl up with her and hold her close.

The next day, things feel normal enough that it's easy to slip into routine, as they wake up, have breakfast, and get ready to go on campus for school. Cat idly talks aloud throughout the morning about the kinds of topics she'd studied the night before that are going to be on her test today, and Sam only half-listens, since she knows this is mostly a study strategy for Cat and not anything relevant to Sam. They park, they kiss, and they head to their respective classes.

Just before Sam goes into class, she gets a goodbye text from Freddie, who is driving home today, and a text from Carly that she's thinking about Sam and planning to go to the record store with Andre later. Sam thanks Freddie for not staying on her couch this time and tells Carly that she'll text her later.

Sam's class is fine; the professor offers critique on their recent works while they spend idle time in class working on unrelated sketches. By the time Sam gets out of her class, Cat is waiting for her outside the building, holding a cup of coffee, which she immediately offers Sam.

“What’s this for?” Sam asks, grinning at her.

Cat shrugs. “The professor had us leave after we finished our tests, so I figured I had time to get you a little something.”

Sam sips the coffee, grunting in satisfaction. “This isn’t Jet Brew,” she observes.

Cat shakes her head. “No, it’s the coffee bar in the student union building.”

“It’s much better,” Sam assesses, taking another sip.

They fall into step with each other as they walk back toward Nona’s car. With Sam’s art pad under one arm and her coffee in her other hand, she can’t link her arm with Cat’s, so she nudges her affectionately with her shoulder. Cat giggles, but then reaches over to take Sam’s art pad so they can link arms.

“How was your test?” Sam asks.

“Fine, I think,” Cat answers easily. “I felt good about almost all the questions.”

“That’s good.”

“How was your class?”

“Eh, pretty boring. Professor just told me to pay more attention to shadows but like, mostly said to keep doing what I’m doing.”

“That’s great!” Cat says enthusiastically.

They walk in a comfortable silence across the campus toward the parking lot where they left Nona’s car that morning. Sam is thinking about Carly—because of course she is—but she also doesn’t want to spoil this easy affection between them as they embark on a weekend together. And not just any weekend, but a full moon weekend.

So when they get into the car, Sam just keeps things simple. “What are you thinking for lunch?” she asks as she buckles up and puts the keys into the ignition.

“We should talk first,” Cat says, and her nervous tone gives Sam every indication of exactly what Cat wants to talk about.

Sam turns toward her in her seat as best she can, being already buckled up. “Right. Okay,” she says. She’s eager, and she feels like that’s not something she can easily hide, but she does her best to sound nonchalant as she follows it up with, “What did you want to talk about?”

Cat looks away, toward the glove compartment, and Sam sees her purse her lips. Finally, she admits, “I’m struggling with this a lot more than I thought I would.” Sam nods in understanding, but doesn’t know what to say to that, so she waits to see if Cat will elaborate. She does, a moment later. “I don’t want to back out of what I promised you two, but it’s *hard*. It was easier back when I was imagining it being something I’d be *involved* in, or...or that I’d

at least have *my turn*..." She trails off, and Sam finds herself thinking about what *Cat's turn* might look like in terms of Cat and Carly and...okay, that's a mental image for another time.

"I get it," Sam tells her softly.

"And I don't *want* to stand between you two, I don't *want* to be a buzzkill, but, Sam, I'm not ready."

Sam's heart sinks and her stomach drops and she tries to quell the flash of anger that surges through her. "Okay," is all she can think of to say, her tone lifeless with the effort of not revealing *anything* about her emotional state.

"All I'm asking for," Cat says quietly, "Is just a little more time. I want...this full moon. I want you to have your regular full moon with Tori and Carly in the park, but can I please have you with me for the rest of the time until the full moon ends?" she asks, tone both defeated and imploring.

Sam lets out her breath. That...seems reasonable enough. Just a few more days for Cat to get used to things, and she can still see Carly tomorrow night, even if they won't exactly be in the right conditions for anything *physical* to happen. Not that it's *just* about the physical with Carly, but...*god* that's most of what Sam has been thinking about lately, she won't deny that. "Hey," she says to Cat softly, "Whatever you need. Besides, I *want* to be with you."

Cat blinks at her, eyes large and bright. "You do?"

Sam shakes her head, just a quick, short movement. "Is that even a question?"

"I just know how much you two *want*..." she can't seem to finish the thought.

"Of course we do. But that doesn't mean I don't want you, too. I *love* spending the full moon with you," Sam assures her. "And even if, someday, we have to figure out different ways to spend quality time together because of this, I'm always going to love my time with you."

Cat takes a shaky breath, and Sam reaches for her, forgetting for a moment about her seatbelt, which quickly impedes her momentum. Cursing lightly, Sam unbuckles her seatbelt and immediately manages to get tangled up in it as she reaches for Cat again, prompting Cat to giggle and reach over to help her before they're leaning over the middle armrest, pressing their foreheads together before Sam kisses Cat, softly.

The one thing that sitting with this dichotomy, this struggle with loving Cat and Carly while she wasn't allowed to *have* Carly, is that Sam has had plenty of time to sit with all her emotions, and there isn't a single part of her that feels like being with Cat when she is thinking so much about Carly is some kind of consolation prize.

And she feels quite certain that she can wait just a little bit longer.

She's waited *years* for Carly Shay. Three days will certainly not kill her, especially if they're three days with the person she's vowed to choose forever.

Because the fact that Cat *isn't* asking her to choose...makes Sam even more certain that always choosing her is the right choice.

But as much as Sam doesn't want to push her luck, she feels like she has to ask Cat for one concession. When she pulls back from kissing Cat, she asks, "Can I talk to her?"

Cat blinks. "Of course you can!"

"I mean, we've been texting a little," Sam admits. Cat nods, like she expected this, though her eyes do dart away again. "But I guess I'm asking if I can call her tonight? To talk about some of this stuff and also to just, you know. At least have a chance to connect with her."

"Of course," Cat answers. Her tone sounds genuine, though she doesn't quite meet Sam's eyes.

It doesn't seem to Sam like Cat really *is* comfortable with it, so she presses. "Are you sure? I can just text her."

Cat shakes her head. "No...no, I think it's a good idea. I *hate* the idea of keeping you apart, and I think talking on the phone would be okay. While I get used to this."

Sam isn't inclined to push anymore, because she likes this answer, and she thinks it makes sense. "Okay."

"Okay?" Cat smiles at her.

"Hey."

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

Cat's grin is as bright as sunshine, and she chuckles. "I love you, too."

"So, lunch?" Sam says again.

It turns out that Cat already planned to make grilled ham and cheese at home, so they head home to do just that, then relax together on the couch watching TV for a while. As afternoon slowly turns to evening, Cat begins to half-heartedly suggest that she get a head start on her homework, since they both know a lot of Saturday into Sunday is going to be taken up by their full moon ritual. Sam merely grunts. She has no interest in working today on something she can put off until Sunday.

But before Cat manages to tear herself away from the rerun of *Girly Cow* that they're watching (which, Sam kinda thought she'd outgrown the show, but it was *so* easy to get sucked right back in), Sam's phone buzzes.

It's Carly.

**Hey I just got back to my apartment**

**Do you have time to talk?**

They'd exchanged a couple of texts during the day, mostly just simple ones, since Sam had school and then was just hanging out with Cat, and Carly had been spending the afternoon with Andre. But now, Sam feels her heart thrum in her chest because she knows it's time to call her new girlfriend.

Honestly...it's still *so weird* to feel this level of excitement about something new with Carly, when she's also known Carly so well for so long, but also feel just...such a deep love and affection for Cat, who is next to her on the couch, watching her with curious but guarded eyes.

"Um," Sam finally utters. It still feels *weird* to actually acknowledge what's going on here, even when they're both clearly aware of it. "I think I might call, uh—" she abruptly wonders if saying Carly's name would actually be too much.

Cat stands up. "Go ahead," she says, tone businesslike. "I should get started on my homework."

"Right," Sam mutters. "I'll be in the back," she gestures toward the bedroom.

"Kay kay," Cat says, voice a little too quiet to be genuinely cheerful.

"Babe?"

"Hmm?"

In answer, Sam kisses her. Cat grins at her when they pull apart. "Love you," Sam says.

Cat visibly brightens, and she shakes her head as she fights a giant smile. "Go call her," she orders Sam. "And, um, I say hi. Or." She frowns, "I don't know...maybe not."

Sam doesn't really know what to make of that, so she heads back to the bedroom and shuts the door. She sits on her bed and presses Carly's name in her phone.

Carly answers after the first ring. "Sam?" she asks eagerly.

Sam immediately springs to her feet, unable to stay sitting. "Yeah. Hi," she answers. Her voice is pitched low, soft. She can't believe how fast her heart is beating.

"Hey," Carly's tone matches her own, more of a sigh than anything else.

There's silence for a moment, but it's not awkward. Sam feels like she's really just taking this moment in, feeling the reality of this connection. "It's good to hear your voice," she finally says. *So cheesy*. Sam doesn't care. It's more than just Carly's voice, it's...hearing Carly's voice...*like that*.

“You, too.” Carly exhales, like there’s a substantial *weight* to everything they’re saying to each other, and speaking releases the burden of carrying it. “*God*, I miss you,” she confesses, in the same sort of breathy tone.

“Me, too,” Sam agrees. She’s pacing, now. She almost feels *nervous* to talk to Carly like this. Maybe it’s pure excitement—despite the fact that nothing they’ve said so far is even *remotely* exciting yet (except that it *is*, because they’re talking to *each other*), or maybe there’s a part of Sam that feels a *little* strange talking so intimately with Carly in a space that is a private haven for her and Cat.

Speaking of Cat, Sam finds herself bringing her up, against her better judgment.

“Cat says hi,” she says, “Or...maybe she doesn’t. She seemed conflicted.”

Carly chuckles. “Tell her hi back. Or not.” Sam laughs, too. “How’s...how’s she doing?” Carly asks, sounding a little trepidatious, like maybe she thinks she shouldn’t ask.

“Eh,” Sam answers. “She’s...she’s struggling. She asked me to give her a few days. Like,” she elaborates quickly. “We’re still on for the park tomorrow with Tori. But she asked me to spend the rest of the full moon with her. After that...” she trails off.

“After that?” Carly lilts flirtatiously

“We can be together,” Sam states plainly, feeling the air rush out of her.

“I can’t wait,” Carly breathes.

“Me, neither,” Sam agrees.

“No, I mean, I literally don’t think I can wait that long.” There’s a sense of urgency in her voice.

“Carls, I...” Sam feels frustrated, a little torn, as she paces, feeling pulled in two directions. Cat’s request had felt *so simple*, so eminently *manageable*, she hadn’t expected to feel pushback from Carly about it. “I have to honor what she needs,” she finally says, almost *whines*.

“I know,” Carly seems to have subsided slightly. “But it feels a little unfair when she’s the one who insisted we *have* this.”

Sam hates that this makes sense. She also knows that Carly isn’t bound by the same affection and devotion that Sam shares with Cat, that their entirely separate relationship is necessarily informed by Sam’s relationship with Cat, but any restrictions and requests from Cat’s end of things happen without Carly’s input or consent.

Sam really doesn’t want to fight with Carly about this. So she just tries to shut it down.

“Yeah, she’s the one who’s *letting* us have this, even when she gets *left out*. I think the most fair thing is to give her some time to get used to this,” she says hotly.

There's silence from Carly's end for a long moment. "Are you mad at me?" she asks, sounding a little hurt and baffled.

Maybe Sam is coming on too strong. "No," she sighs, rubbing at her face. "It's just...fuck. I think I'm just kinda starting to realize that as easy as it is to fall in love with two people, having *two girlfriends* is a lot more complicated."

"I'm sorry," Carly says. "I'm not trying to make this harder for you, honest. I guess I was just confused. Since Cat was the one who seemed so certain about how she *wanted* us to be happy, she wanted more love in the world. And it *is* a little frustrating that she gets to tell us how to have our relationship. I *get* it," she adds quickly. "And I'm literally not asking you to change *anything*. I want you and Cat to be happy together, I really do. It's just..." she trails off. "I wasn't lying when I said I don't think I can wait." Her voice has dropped considerably, and it's...*sultry*.

"You're not making this any easier," Sam warns.

"I'm not asking you to come over," Carly tells her. "But Sam, I haven't had sex since I *moved* here. I'm...*this* close to begging you. But I won't."

Sam feels her knees going weak and sinks onto her bed, awkwardly, because her bed frame is so high up. It takes her a moment to roll and flail so that she's actually sitting on her bed and not just half-leaning on it.

She guesses the silence stretches as she situations herself, because Carly says regretfully. "Sorry if that was too much."

"No," Sam manages, her mouth dry. "No, it's...it's honest. And to be honest myself, it's hard for me to want to wait three days, too."

"Four days, really," Carly corrects her. "Since the full moon lasts til Tuesday morning, so..."

"Right, thanks, that makes it easier," Sam sighs.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to see you tomorrow without just jumping you, as soon as dawn hits, right in front of Tori."

Sam laughs. "Oh, god. That's...terrible."

"Yeah, not really my preference, either," Carly answers dryly.

"I mean, we don't have to go to the park if it's going to be too much."

"No, we're doing it," Carly declares. "Seeing you even if I can't touch you is better than not seeing you at all."

"Yeah," Sam agrees wistfully.

"Like I said, I'm not asking you to come over," Carly repeats. "But, maybe there is something we can do that will...help," she says slyly.



“What?” Sam asks. Maybe she’s still a little stuck on the image of a naked Carly pouncing on her in the middle of the forest right in front of a naked Tori that she doesn’t immediately follow what Carly is suggesting.

“Maybe we could talk to each other. While we...you know.”

Sam’s breath hitches. *Fuck*, that might be the hottest thing she’s ever heard, even as Carly manages to be coy about it. It also...seems like a really risky idea. “I...dunno,” she gets out.

“Why? You’re alone, aren’t you?” Carly asks worriedly.

“Yeah.”

“Then...” she trails off. “If we’re gonna do it *for real* in a couple of days, what’s the harm in a little preview right now?”

It makes perfect sense. Cat knows Sam is having a private phone call with Carly, and all *kinds* of words of affection can be exchanged on the phone. Are erotic words really so much different, if both are an important part of this new relationship they’re exploring?

Sam guesses that Cat could easily and reasonably expect something like this to happen on this approved, sanctioned phone call. And as excited as she is...something about it makes Sam hesitate.

Maybe it’s the fact that she’s in the bedroom she shares with Cat, in the *bed* they sometimes share. Maybe it’s because Cat is only a room away, close enough that if Sam listens hard, she can hear her (mostly the turning of textbook pages and the scribbling of notes, occasional humming). She knows that doesn’t mean Cat can hear her; over time she’s been able to gauge the limitations of human hearing and she knows that unless she shouts or drops something heavy, Cat isn’t going to hear anything that goes on in this room with the door closed. And if she’s listening to music on her headphones, maybe not even then.

Sam thinks that Carly’s idea is a fair suggestion (and a *hot* one), but she also can’t help but think that if she participates, she’ll feel like she got away with something under Cat’s nose. And that’s not really how she wants to start things off.

“I’m just not sure it’s fair, without talking to Cat.”

Carly lets out her breath audibly. “Are we going to have to run every part of our relationship by her?”

Sam opens her mouth, then closes it again. She doesn’t think she wants that. She doesn’t even think *Cat* wants that.

This is all just so new and confusing, and every decision Sam makes feels like she’s prioritizing one person she loves at the detriment of the other.

“No, I don’t think any of us want that,” Sam answers. “You’re right. Okay, how about this? You should...touch yourself. I won’t, but I’ll...I’ll help you.”

Carly hums. “Too bad. I really wanted to hear about how wet I’m going to make you.”

“You’re going to know *firsthand* in a couple of days,” Sam teases.

Carly groans. “*Firsthand*. Oh, that was bad.”

“Or was it *great*?” Sam challenges, then lets her voice get softer. “Because I know all I’m thinking about now is your hands on me.”

It’s Carly’s turn to get quiet for a moment, and then she finds her voice. “*God*, I can’t wait for that,” she murmurs. “You know you look better than ever?”

“Stop,” Sam chuckles.

“No, really,” Carly insists. “You look...your hair is just *gorgeous*.” Sam squirms, a little uncomfortable with this kind of praise. She can understand that people might find her attractive, but it’s always been difficult for her to listen to the details. “You just look *healthy*.” That much is probably true. Cat feeds her well, gives her incentive to keep herself clean. “And your boobs look *great*,” Carly gushes.

Sam openly laughs at that. “Yeah, they’re not bad, huh?” *That* detail is one she doesn’t mind hearing about because sometimes her own cleavage mesmerizes her.

“Not bad? *Not bad*?” Carly sounds scandalized. “Try *awesome*.”

“I have awesome boobs. Got it,” Sam cracks.

Carly laughs, too, then scolds, “This isn’t going to work if we just keep joking around.”

“Sorry, it’s just not something I’ve ever done before,” Sam tells her.

“Yeah,” Carly agrees. “Me, neither.”

They’re both quiet for a moment, perhaps thinking about the history between them, the time they lost. But Sam tries to get them back on track. “Italy’s been good for you, you know,” she tells her.

“What do you mean?” Carly asks.

“You just came back to the states with such a...*European swagger*. It looked good on you.”

Carly laughs again. “I don’t think any part of Europe is ready to claim me as one of their own. I don’t smoke nearly enough cigarettes.”

“I’m just saying, *something* about you seemed different. Like, *sexier* somehow. I figured a sexy place like Italy must’ve rubbed off on you.”

“It *is* a pretty sexy place,” Carly admits. “But I still don’t think I really fit in there.”

“I do want to hear about it,” Sam says. “You know. Someday.”

“I’ll tell you about my sexy Italian adventures,” Carly agrees. “One day.”

But not today. Because while it isn’t *news* that Carly must’ve had sex in Italy—she certainly had never said she hadn’t been with anyone since Sam—Sam is really starting to consider what Carly’s life might’ve been like there, what expectations she might have. And she reacts with her typical bravado. “But first, we’re going to see each other in four days. And then I’m going to fuck you so good you’re going to forget about most of those *sexy adventures*,” she drawls.

“*God*, I need you,” Carly groans, “There’s been no one as good as you, Sam. *No one*.”

Sam knows this could just as easily be talk, but she appreciates it anyway. “Now I kinda want to hear you talk about how wet you are for me,” she tells her softly. “You should touch yourself.”

“You think I’m not *already* touching myself?” Carly shoots back. “Keep up, Puckett.”

*Jesus*. “What?”

“You heard me.”

Sam *did*, but still, the absurdity of it all makes her laugh. “But I haven’t even been saying anything sexy to you.”

“*Really* doesn’t matter, with the kinds of thoughts I’ve been having,” Carly tells her, tension lacing her voice.

*Oh*. “Like what?” Sam asks eagerly.

“Where do I start?” Carly asks rhetorically, breathlessly. “I like to think about what it was like to touch you,” she says, and from her tone, it sounds like she has more to say, but the silence stretches.

“I think about that a lot, too,” Sam admits quietly. She stretches back on her bed to lie down against her pillows, staring up at her ceiling, at all the found art and junk she’s decorated her side of the room with. “Or, like. How sometimes you’d just...*pounce* on me,” she says.

It’s a little harder than she expected to actually *talk* about the sex they’ve had, the sex they’d *like* to have. But she hears Carly inhale shakily. “When you’d leave scratches and bites all over my body and I’d have to hide them from everyone? I *miss* that.”

“When *I’d* do that? You gave as good as you got,” Sam smirks.

“Sure, but people *expect* random cuts and bruises on you.”

“People expect *hickeys* on me?” Sam asks incredulously.

“Is this really the time to debate this? When I have my hand in my pants?”

“No, I guess not,” Sam says weakly.

“Tell me what you want to do to me in four days,” Carly demands.

Sam closes her eyes to gather her thoughts. “I’m gonna...I can’t wait to kiss you again.” Carly hums affirmatively. “And to see you naked and actually get to *touch* you.”

“Touch me where?” Carly asks, increasingly needy, eager.

“I’m gonna pin you down on your bed—”

A snort from Carly, “I’d like to see you try,” she murmurs.

Sam continues on as if she hasn’t spoken, because *she* knows Carly only gets the upper hand when Sam *lets* her, “And I’m just gonna *feel* your body underneath mine. All that skin,” she says quietly, “Us, just...pressing together.” It’s so sexy in her mind, but it’s hard to describe.

“And then?” Carly asks.

“I can’t wait to go down on you,” Sam says quickly. “To just...*taste* you.” She feels like she’s faltering, feels like she doesn’t know what else to say. It’s *awkward*. She’s blushing, even though everything about this is also making her *so wet*.

“You know what I want?” Carly says, more of a statement than a question. “Your fingers, Inside me.”

Sam groans softly. “You’re always *so wet* for me.”

“I am. Right now,” Carly confirms, her voice getting reedier, threadier. “I *need* your mouth on me.”

Sam’s eyes are closed, her mind full of the jumbled images and memories of sex with Carly. How much they’ve already explored and learned about each other, and how much more there still is to discover. “I love the way it feels when you come,” Sam murmurs, remembering acutely the shape of Carly’s mouth, the arch of her back, the swell of triumph.

“*Fuck*. I’m gonna—”

“Yeah, you are,” Sam drawls. “And you’re gonna pretend you’re coming against my mouth.”

It figures that just as she feels she’s starting to get the hang of this kind of dirty talk, it’s over. She hears the soft keens and moans through the phone, the sound of breaths and silence, and heavy sighs and gasps that precede Carly’s voice croaking, “Oh, my god.”

“Yeah,” Sam breathes, eyes still squeezed shut. She realizes her thighs are clenched tightly, too, and tries to relax them. “That was...”

“That was *exactly* what I needed,” Carly sighs.

“You’re so...” Sam tries to find the words she wants. Sexy? Irresistible? Gorgeous? They’re all true, but they don’t feel like enough. “God, you’re so fucking hot,” is what she lands on, even though it’s probably the weakest of all the words she can think of.

Carly just laughs. “Look who’s talking,” she purrs.

“Eh,” Sam shrugs. “I’m just good with my hands.”

“You’re good with your *everything*,” Carly sighs.

“Well, now I’m not sure *I* can make it until Tuesday,” Sam grumbles.

“It’s not too late to get off with me,” Carly murmurs seductively, and with her eyes closed, Sam can easily imagine the glint in Carly’s dark eyes that she’d be able to see if Carly were right there with her, in this bed.

“No, I’ll...I’d better not,” Sam says reluctantly. “Just think of it this way. Waiting four days is gonna suck, but it’s going to be *so good* when we finally get together, I don’t think it’ll even matter.”

“You’re right,” Carly laughs softly. “It’s like how I’d have to wait until full moons to kiss you. Even though I wanted to earlier sometimes. That *anticipation*...it’s heady.”

“So let’s do our best to enjoy it,” Sam says.

“I can. I will,” Carly agrees. “Besides, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“No fucking me in front of Tori,” Sam warns. Though right now, in the state she’s in, she thinks, would that really be so bad?

Carly laughs, “Good god, no. She’d explode from gay panic. I don’t want that on my conscience.”

Sam laughs, too, and they fall into an easy silence. “It feels really, really good to just be able to laugh with you without...” she trails off. She doesn’t really want to talk about the struggles of the last several months as they’ve wrestled with their boundaries and masks and the joys and pitfalls of their easy connection with each other. Their forbidden love is *bidden*, something they’ve been *invited* to indulge in.

Sam wonders when she’ll stop feeling like it has to be a secret.

## Islands—Goodness

Cat does her best to focus on homework, but it *is* hard, when Sam is just a room away, on the phone with Carly. She's torn over whether she wants to know exactly everything that they're talking about or...if she just wants to pretend none of it is happening at all.

Her mind wanders as her eyes skim over the words on the page she's supposed to be reading. What kinds of things are Sam and Carly talking about as they embark on this new relationship, one where Cat is holding the reins, keeping them apart, however temporarily.

Cat knows it's probably not fair. But she also thinks it's not fair that she doesn't get to be a part of this exciting new connection. It's not anyone's *fault*, and she doesn't resent Carly for not feeling the same, at least, she doesn't *think* she does. But it sucks. There's no denying that she feels hurt by the situation.

But what might they be talking about?

Cat figures there's probably a lot to catch up on. As far as she knows, Sam and Carly have had very few one on one conversations since reconnecting in Los Angeles, and they have been about particular issues: what to do about Shadow Creek Park, or Freddie's visits, for instance. They must have a lot they need to fill each other in about, things that have happened, things they've experienced, in the time they've been apart.

But when she considers that they have the prospect of reconnecting, romantically, *sexually*... Cat feels like she has a better sense of what they might be discussing.

When Sam comes out of the bedroom, she looks a little...embarrassed. Almost shy, which is an unusual look for her. But she heads right over to where Cat is sitting and working and plants a big kiss, right on her lips. Cat squeaks in surprise, and when they pull apart, asks, "What was that for?"

"Nothin'," Sam shrugs, offering a self-conscious little grin.

Cat can't help but giggle a little at the situation, both because she likes surprise kisses from Sam and because Sam is acting just odd enough that it's a little awkward. "How is..." Cat finds she can't bring herself to ask about Carly directly. "How was your chat?" she amends.

"Fine," Sam replies, already heading over to the couch to sprawl across it and grab the remote.

Cat guesses that's it, then.

But later on, when they're getting ready for bed, and Sam comes up behind her to wrap her arms around her and move her hair to the side to press kisses against her neck, Cat melts against her.

"I want you," Sam murmurs in her ear.

Cat presses back against her, writhing slightly as she wrestles with herself. She *never* doubts Sam's desire for her, but something within her is hesitant. "How do you want me?" she asks.

Sam doesn't answer verbally, but Cat allows herself to be guided to the bed, where she ends up with Sam on top of her, grinding against her, desperate, ferocious movements that indicate how close the full moon is.

And Sam comes *very* quickly, even for her under these lunar conditions.

Then Cat is treated to Sam between her legs, mouth working, fingers slipping inside of her, and despite her initial reticence, Cat is swept up in sensation and in *Sam*, and finds herself following with her own orgasm rather quickly, herself.

As they fall asleep wrapped up in each other, something about it nags at Cat.

Eventually, she realizes that this is the first time she can recall that she hasn't felt...deeply *connected* to Sam during sex.

And the problem is, she can't be sure that it isn't her own insecurities that prevented that level of intimacy, or that, perhaps, Sam might've been thinking of...someone else.

Or maybe it's a little of both. Or maybe one led to the other. Maybe Sam had been distracted, and it left Cat feeling insecure, or maybe Cat hadn't brought as much of her own enthusiasm to the encounter as she normally does, leaving Sam to...get distracted.

Cat can't even really *blame* Sam for thinking about Carly. Haven't they both had sex recently in which Cat was fairly certain they were *both* thinking about her? But now that Cat knows that her fantasies will always be just that, just fantasies, whereas Sam gets to make them a *reality*...

It's hard to fall asleep when her thoughts keep bringing her back to what she can't have, the ways she feels abandoned by circumstances she absolutely set in motion.

The next day starts out fairly normal, for a weekend: Cat wakes up first and makes eggs and bacon for breakfast (since it's a full moon), Sam wanders out when the smell of bacon rouses her from sleep, and they enjoy their morning together. The easy intimacy of snuggling on the couch and watching cartoons makes it so Cat isn't particularly worried about anything, isn't thinking that much about the evening.

Until early afternoon, when Sam gets a text on her phone. She's gotten a few throughout the morning, sporadic texts, nothing that really caught Cat's attention, but she sees the way Sam frowns at this one.

"What is it?" Cat asks, wondering if she ought to pry.

"Um, I was trying to figure out if I needed to loop you in on this one..."

"Loop me in on *what*?" Cat asks, trying not to sound too apprehensive.

“It’s, uh, Carly just texted asking me how we want to handle whether we say anything to Tori and Jade.”

“Well, of *course* I want to be looped in on that!” Cat fires.

“Babe, I *know*. I meant whether to add you into the *actual* text thread,” Sam shoots back defensively.

“Oh.” Cat considers this briefly. “No, you can just talk to me,” she decides.

“I mean,” Sam says slowly, “they kind of already know about the *feelings* involved here. I don’t want anyone thinking...” she trails off.

Cat nods, but honestly, she’s a little torn. She certainly doesn’t want her friends thinking that Sam and Carly are cheating on her *either*, and she feels certain, and the two of them seem to agree, that their behavior is going to make it a *bit* obvious that something has changed.

On the other hand, she also knows that Tori and Jade know that she likes Carly, too. Or, at least, Jade definitely knows, so Tori probably knows, too. And with that knowledge, it’s going to make it all the more obvious that Cat got rejected in this scenario, and just the *thought* of other people knowing that makes Cat feel utterly *humiliated*.

But she considers the fact that it feels difficult to talk about this with Sam right now, but it’s also difficult for her to keep it all to herself. Even if she doesn’t relish the idea of making her rejection public, Cat knows she’s going to want to talk to Jade about this.

It’s going to come out anyway, one way or another. Cat will talk to Jade. Tori will undoubtedly be able to tell something is going on with Sam and Carly. Maybe she’ll even *smell* it; she’s heard Sam say weird things about smelling moods before.

They’re not hiding this. So Cat has her answer. “I think we should tell them,” she tells Sam.

“Yeah?” Sam asks, scrutinizing her.

Cat nods faintly. “I think they’re going to figure it out anyway. But I don’t want anyone else to know yet.” She can almost *see* Beck’s mix of stoic judgment and pity when he finds out about this, Robbie’s wide-eyed alarm mixed with thinly-veiled titillation, Andre’s well-meaning but unwelcome concern and uncertainty. There’s a high chance Tori and Jade will react in a similar vein as well, but...Cat feels better about her chances of actually communicating with them well enough to make them understand.

As a group, they understand a lot about each other. And Cat has no doubt that when it comes down to it, Tori and Jade will be supportive.

“I think you’re right,” Sam says. “And I don’t think we want anyone else to know yet, either. We all need more time to get used to this.”

Cat thinks that Sam is really saying this for *her* benefit, not anyone else’s, and she appreciates it while still feeling chafed by it.



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Shadow Creek Park has been a highlight of Carly's month for a while now, and she never expected to be even *more* excited about a trip to her favorite place with some of her favorite people, but here she is, playing love songs loudly in her car and dancing in her seat as she makes the never-smooth drive across town to Tori's house in the Hollywood Hills.

She's *so* excited to see Sam, for the first time since they made their reconnection official, and she's excited to tell their friends about what's happening between them.

She's nervous about that, too, but mostly, she's just happy that there will be someone else who knows. She hasn't talked any more to Freddie about it, though to be fair, he has been pretty busy, driving back up to Stanford and then, presumably, doing college stuff for the rest of this weekend. But Carly also wonders if he was really the best choice to talk to about this, anyway. It probably doesn't delight him to realize that Sam gets to sleep with the girl he had a crush on for *years*, and another girl he thought was *so cute* back when he visited Los Angeles before, while he doesn't even have a girlfriend.

Carly doesn't even know if he's had sex. Not that she *needs* to know. But she has been pretty open with him. Maybe he hasn't shared because he doesn't have anything *to* share, or maybe he still has a bit of that Freddie squeamishness about talking about personal things with women. Despite the fact that he's had two female best friends for most of his life.

Anyway, yeah, Carly figures Freddie isn't going to be her best confidant in this arena. She's hoping that Tori might be a better person to be honest with, once she and Jade are looped into the situation.

She wonders how Tori and Jade will react.

She realizes, as she gets closer to Tori's house, that although she and Sam had agreed (and Cat evidently felt the same way) to be honest with their friends about the currently complicated dynamic they were in, they hadn't really discussed *how* they were going to reveal this change.

*Shit.* She wishes she could call Sam, but chances are, Sam is already there (she usually beats Carly to Tori's), or if she isn't, she's probably on her motorcycle, so she wouldn't be able to answer a call, anyway.

Carly pulls into Tori's driveway to discover that she is correct, and Sam's motorcycle is already parked off to the side. Carly pulls into what she's claimed as her usual parking spot for these evenings and heads up the driveway to knock on Tori's front door.

"It's open!" Tori shouts in response, so Carly walks in.

To her surprise, the first person to speak is Cat, who cries, "Yay, it's Carly! Hi, Carly!"

"Hey, Cat," she chuckles, smiling at her, before her eyes shift immediately to Sam, who is gazing at her with a sort of soft adoration.

“Hey,” Sam says quietly.

“Hey, yourself,” Carly replies, resisting the urge to just *grab* her.

She doesn’t quite realize how long the two of them just *stare* at each other until Jade drawls, “Nice to see you, too.”

Carly laughs awkwardly, “Hey, you two,” she waves at Jade and Tori.

“Hey!” Tori replies brightly from the kitchen, then frowns. “That’s such a weird word. Hey? Like, where did that *come* from?”

“It doesn’t even sound like a word anymore!” Cat agrees.

“Something smells *great*,” Carly states, trying to distract from her clearly awkward entrance. Why is it so hard for her to just *be cool* sometimes?

“I’ll say,” Sam replies, eyes still fixed on Carly. Carly presses her lips together and has to look away.

She immediately catches Jade’s eye. Jade frowns slightly.

“I’m making meatloaf,” Tori tells her.

“Or *trying* to, anyway,” Jade says in a subdued tone.

“It looks like she’s doing fine,” Cat defends Tori. “It’s my recipe,” she tells Carly.

“Ooh, then it’s probably going to be *good*,” Carly gushes, which makes Cat look away from her.

“Cross your fingers,” Jade snarks.

Tori just glares at her girlfriend, then says, “I followed Cat’s recipe *exactly*, so it’s going to be *good*,” she states confidently.

“Hey, I trust you,” Carly says easily.

“At least *someone* here does,” Tori side-eyes her girlfriend yet again.

“I’m not picky, so I’m not worried.” Sam declares. Tori frowns at this, so Sam quickly adds, “I mean, I trust you, too.”

Jade snorts and avoids Tori’s third nasty look in a matter of seconds. “You know, Jade, I haven’t exactly seen *you* offer to jump in and help me here,” she says pointedly.

“I know *my* limits,” Jade replies.

Tori sighs, “It’s not like I’m trying to make pizza from *scratch*, here. With *you* giving me the *wrong* ingredients.”

“How do you think I learned my limits?” Jade smirks.

Carly glances over at Sam, who looks amused, but then her expression shifts into something that *smolders* a little as she looks back at Carly, who drops her gaze, searching for something, *anything* to distract her.

She finds herself looking at Jade again, who looks a bit inquisitive and a lot suspicious.

“Sooo,” Jade drawls. “What’s new?”

“New?” Tori looks at Jade dubiously. “We all *just* saw each other a couple of days ago.”

“That means there are entire *days* to fill each other in on,” Jade presses, eyes roving over Sam, Cat, and Carly in turn.

Tori still looks confused, and Carly looks back at Sam, who looks at Cat, who looks at Carly, then back at Sam.

With both sets of eyes on her, Sam nods, slightly, maybe to herself, and says, “Well, something *did* happen a couple days ago...”

“Uh *huh*,” Jade answers with a mild note of triumph in her utterance, and shoots a smirk at Tori. “Do tell.”

“Uh, well,” Sam starts, glancing back at Cat and Carly as if seeking their input. “So, um. I guess it’s no secret here that Carls and I still really liked each other.”

“That’s one way to put it.” To Carly’s surprise, it’s Tori who mumbles this, though she looks immediately like she wishes she hadn’t.

“Right. So, um. We talked about it. And, well, Cat and I had talked a lot about this, too. And we kinda decided that it just made sense if we just ended up deciding to—”

“Sam and Carly are dating,” Cat cuts in abruptly, saving Sam from her rambling.

“They’re—” Jade starts, sounding a bit surprised.

“Oh, my god, *Cat*—” Tori starts, cutting Jade off.

“But Cat and I are still together!” Sam adds, quickly and loudly, before anyone can jump to any other conclusions.

“Wait, but...” Tori’s brow crinkles as she looks between them, but then her eyes widen. “Oh. *Oh!*”

“Uh *huh*,” Jade says again, her tone much flatter this time as she regards everyone coolly, looking intrigued and doubtful.

“So, *yeah*, that’s what’s new,” Carly says brightly as the room stays silent for a few moments longer than she’s comfortable with.

“So basically,” Jade says bluntly, “Sam has two girlfriends.” When everyone nods, she looks between Cat and Carly. “And you’re both *okay* with that?”

“Jade,” Tori interjects quietly, clear warning in her voice.

Cat shrugs. “Well, sure!”

“Sam and Cat are *so good* together, I would never want to come between them,” Carly replies. It’s honest, but she worries Jade doesn’t believe her as she gazes at her skeptically.

“And I want them both to be happy, too,” Cat says succinctly. “They were miserable, trying to pretend they weren’t in love. It wouldn’t be fair of me to stand between them, either.” It sounds honest to Carly, but Jade is gazing at Cat with even more scrutiny than she gave Carly, and she looks almost *pitying*.

“Right,” Jade says slowly. “Sure, I get it,” she says.

“*Do* you?” Sam asks directly, a hint of challenge in her voice.

Jade holds up her hands. “Hey, you guys do what makes you happy.”

“Hey. There’s that word again,” Tori cuts in with an uncomfortable giggle.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Cat adds, voice oddly gruff and guttural.

“Um,” Tori announces, standing up from where she was crouched in front of the oven.

“Dinner’s ready.” She waves the meat thermometer she’s holding.

It’s perfect timing, giving the group something else to focus on instead of devolving into awkward nonsense.

They eat dinner on the couch (which, Jade ends up having to eat her words as a side dish, because the meatloaf is actually *delicious*), with the TV on, which further helps them avoid awkward conversation. Sam and Cat sit on one couch, and Carly is unable to resist taking a seat on Sam’s other side, despite the fact that she knows they still need to tread a little bit carefully around Cat, to avoid upsetting her. It seems fine, though. All they really do is bump shoulders or legs and grin at each other, something Sam is doing with Cat in equal measure. Tori seems fixated on the TV screen, while Jade seems to be surreptitiously watching them.

Well. Carly understands it. It’s new, and it’s strange. She can’t blame Jade for being concerned or curious.

The drive to Shadow Creek Park isn’t really different, because Cat sits in the middle of the backseat, as she usually does, but now, Carly isn’t sure how to act around her. There isn’t really a way to sit back there without all squishing together to some degree, but Carly sits as close to the door as possible to give Cat space. Cat doesn’t ignore her, but she doesn’t seem inclined to seek a lot of contact with Carly, either.

Conversation is fairly normal, though, and when everyone gets quiet toward the end of the drive, Jade just turns up the radio a little. Carly watches the sparse vegetation out the window,

bobbing her head to the music.

Jade parks, and Carly continues to focus on the landscape while the two other couples kiss goodbye for the evening, and then she, Tori and Sam start walking toward their clearing in the copse.

“I have to say,” Tori says quietly as they walk; she’s walking between them, which is fine with Carly, for now. “I’m a little surprised. I know it’s none of my business and I’m not trying to tell you anything about how you should, uh, have a relationship or two. I’m just... surprised.”

Sam shrugs, something Carly can see out of the corner of her eye. “I mean, I guess it’s kinda weird. But it was the only solution any of us could see that wouldn’t just...blow everything up, for us and for this friend group.”

“Yeah, I can see that. And I’m glad that we still get to do this all together.” Tori shakes her head. “I guess I didn’t realize how close this was to exploding.”

“When Carly came to see me the other day, it was to say we needed to not see each other anymore. At all. Because it was getting too difficult,” Sam sums up.

“Luckily for me, Sam and Cat had been talking and had already agreed that it made more sense to just invite more love into our lives than be restrictive.”

Tori looks pensive as she stands in her unofficially designated section of the clearing and starts to take off her jacket. “Cat is maybe the most surprising part of this for me. Like, that she’d be *okay* with this.” Carly glances at Sam, who looks back at her with an almost *guilty* expression on her face. It seems that Tori notices right away, because she says, “Whoa, wait. She *is* okay with this, *right?*”

“She is,” Sam says quickly, “It’s also kinda a little harder for her than she was expecting.”

“So Sam and I haven’t seen each other since the other day when we all talked and Sam and I...got back together.”

Tori looks between them. “How are you not all over each other?”

“We’re *polite*,” Sam says sharply.

Tori and Carly both snort at that, grinning at each other.

“Not the first word I’d use for you,” Carly quips.

“Look, okay.” Sam is stepping out of her pants, so she’s not looking at either of them. “Cat wanted to be...*more* of a part of this.”

Tori looks between them. “More of a part of this,” she repeats, clearly confused.

“Apparently, she likes me, too,” Carly admits, feeling warm. “But...” she trails off.

“*Ooh*,” Tori nods. “Right. So...right.”

“*Yeah*,” Sam and Carly say in unison.

“But she’s good enough to still let me have this,” Sam says succinctly. “But like I said. That’s why it’s taking some time to get used to this.”

“Got it,” Tori says.

They’re all quiet as they undress. Tori seems thoughtful, and Carly, truthfully, is trying not to do anything *too* lewd or suggestive to Sam, who is *right there*.

Finally, they’re all naked, and Tori looks between them. “So you said you haven’t seen each other since you got together?”

“Right,” Sam nods, glancing at Carly.

Tori takes a breath. “Don’t make me regret this, but...I’m going to turn around for a minute.”

And she turns, presses her fingers into her ears, and starts loudly singing *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

Carly looks at Sam. Sam is looking right back at her.

It takes mere moments before they crash together, skin on skin, lips on lips, grabbing each other and kissing like they’re never going to stop.

“God, I’ve missed you,” Carly manages between kisses.

“Shut up,” Sam grunts, kissing her harder.

It’s not enough. It *can’t* be enough, when it’s only long enough for Tori to get through the national anthem not even twice, and Carly feels the surge of energy course through her body, twisting her spine and buckling her knees as she pulls away from Sam.

“Shit,” she curses.

Tori turns back around, “Thank me later,” she growls, yellowing eyes regarding them fiercely.

They back away from each other with just enough time before they fall to all fours, and Carly emits a howl of frustration, her body wanting to *fight* the transformation, and just have time with *Sam*. Human Sam, the Sam she’s missed the most for all this time, because the wolves have thoroughly reacquainted themselves by now.

It’s just not fair.

But that sense of loss, of nostalgia, of envy and wistfulness and longing slowly recedes, as natural as an ebbing tide, as Carly fully transforms. A wolf doesn’t care about the particularly human struggle with sublimated desire, because all the wolf wants is *right here*.

*Sam*. As striking and powerful and utterly *silly* as she ever was as she shakes herself out and then lifts her hind paw to scratch her ear, then springs onto all four legs to face Carly, tail tucked low for just a moment before it begins wagging madly, and with a yip, she nearly bowls Carly over with the force of her lunge.

Carly tries to find her footing, but it's hard when Sam is whimpering in her ear, licking all over her face, nuzzling her neck. Carly hears a rhythmic sound, but it takes her a second to connect it to the motion and sensation of her own tail as it thumps madly against the firm earth of the clearing as she tries to return Sam's licks and nuzzles as they enjoy the freedom to be as intimate as they can in their wolf shapes.

It also takes her a second to recognize the sound of Tori's huffing breaths until she growls at them both.

Instantly, they spring apart, turning on Tori, with stiff legs and raised hackles. Tori looks back, teeth bared, but her tail lowers and tucks between her legs, an apology.

Carly looks toward Sam, and in unison, they lunge toward Tori, chasing her out of the clearing, but by now, it's playful as they tackle her, barking and yipping with glee as they approach the stretch of dry grass near the parking area where Jade and Cat are waiting.

The ritual continues as usual, with head-scratches from the humans (Carly is surprised to receive some from Cat) and playing with dog toys for a while before Jade and Cat leave (Carly is again surprised to receive goodbye pets from Cat, too), before the wolves are left to their own devices in the vast landscape that is fully theirs for the night.

It turns out, though, that Tori's warning growl at the beginning of the night isn't the only indication of distress they receive from her that night.

Because Carly and Sam can *barely* leave each other alone.

Tori's whines turn to barks which turn to growls which turn to yips which turn to nips as she attempts to be included in their play. Which, every time she gives them a signal that she's feeling isolated, they lavish attention on her, but too quickly, they revert to their singular focus on each other.

Carly hadn't really expected to react this way as a wolf to the reality of being lovers again as humans (not that *that's* been consummated, but honestly, the specificities of human sex are far from her mind as a wolf; it's simply not something her wolf's mind finds interesting), but it's clear that their shift in relationship status has implications even for their intimacy as wolves.

Carly supposes she never really thought about it because she and Sam were *always* the same with each other for all the years in Seattle that they changed together. They were *always* each other's primary person, in part because they were each other's *only* other wolf, given Sam's relationship with her mother, Melanie's distance, and Spencer's wolfsbane usage.

And now, they both have a close connection with Tori, and Tori has been there as a buffer between them as their wolves allowed themselves to get reacquainted in the context of

rediscovering what kind of connection they can have, in the wake of everything they've been through. Tori has been a core part of their dynamic in Shadow Creek Park.

Until suddenly, she isn't. Because as with anything else, it only takes the slightest signal to revert back to their former selves for Sam and Carly to become the way they were years ago with each other.

When they wake up in the morning as they're changing back, the first words out of Carly's mouth are, "I'm sorry," to Tori.

In fact, her jaw isn't even fully reshaped yet, so it's rather jumbled, but Tori clearly understands her.

Shivering as she reaches for her clothes, the now fully human Tori shakes her head. "Now that I'm a human again, I get it more. Believe me, it *sucked* last night, feeling so pushed out of the group. But like I said, I really do understand. You two have had to hold back in *every* way while humans together, you haven't even had a chance to—" she gestures at them in a vague and mildly agitated way, face a little pink, "—you know, so, I can understand how it came out as wanting a lot of closeness as wolves, but..." she trails off, then looks imploring at them. "I really hope it doesn't feel that way again."

"It won't," Sam says with conviction. "I'm sorry, too, for the record."

Tori accepts the apology with a nod and they finish redressing, all of them slowly warming their chilly human flesh in the cool morning air. Tori glances over toward the parking lot. "I'll go see if Jade has arrived yet. You two can stay back here. But when I tell you she's here, you'd better not dawdle."

Carly looks at Sam, who gazes back at her with bright blue eyes, almost as if a trace of amber lingers behind them, tinting them like sunlight in a clear sky.

They take the opportunity to reconnect physically once again, even if it only lasts for the half-minute or so that Tori slowly makes her way to the edge of the trees, and obediently, they trot after her at her call with only a few extra kisses's worth of delaying.

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Cat can *feel* that Jade is burning with questions as they get into her car to head back to Jade's house in the city. And though Cat knows she wants to talk to Jade about all of this, right now, it just feels *embarrassing*, and she tries to side-step it.

"What movie are we going to watch tonight?" she asks eagerly.

Jade hums thoughtfully. "I should rewatch *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* for class. It's been a few years."

Cat frowns. "I didn't like what you showed me of that one."

"You were also, what, fourteen? Fifteen?" Jade glances at her with a devious smile. "I've had more time to toughen you up. So has Sam."



“I think I was more bored than scared last time,” Cat tells her, making Jade huff in mild irritation. “Let’s watch something else,” Cat insists.

“Fine,” Jade grunts. “Oh, I do have to watch *Onibaba*, too.”

“What’s that?”

“A Japanese thriller.”

“Thriller, or *horror movie*,” Cat asks pointedly. When Jade doesn’t answer right away, she says, “That doesn’t make me feel good about this idea.”

“I haven’t seen it, so I don’t know how disturbing it is,” Jade replies. “But I *think* *Onibaba* means ‘demon hag.’”

Cat shudders. “No, thank you.”

“Boring,” Jade complains. She sighs. “Fine, what do *you* want to watch?”

“Don’t you have any movies that have a happy ending?” Cat asks.

It seems like Jade doesn’t hear her, because there’s no response.

“Don’t you have—” she begins to ask again.

“I’m thinking,” Jade interrupts. “I don’t know. Would you consider *Taxi Driver* to have a happy ending?”

“No?” Cat replies, because she’s never actually seen it, but she’s heard enough to know what it’s about. “I mean more like...*love* happy endings.”

Jade groans. “I’m *not* watching *Ella Enchanted* with you again.”

“Well, I don’t want to watch anything that will give me nightmares!”

“*Edward Scissorhands* gives you nightmares!”

“It was just *one*!” She considers this. “Actually, I’d watch that again.”

Jade sighs. “I still maintain that a movie about a guy with *scissors* for hands *should* be a brutal slasher, but fine, I guess we can watch that.”

“Yay!” Cat claps.

They’re both quiet for a while as Jade drives down the deserted road with the sparsely vegetated desert landscape on either side, illuminated by the full moon in the darkening night. Jade turns up the radio, and Cat just watches the Joshua trees and scrubby shrubs give way to lights and billboards and homes as they make their way back into the heart of the city to Jade’s house.

But as they sit on Jade's couch with a bowl of popcorn and *Edward Scissorhands* in the DVD player, Jade finally says, "Okay, I've been quiet about this long enough." She turns and scrutinizes Cat, her eyes lighter and greener than Sam's, but there's a similar kind of fire deep within them.

"What?" Cat asks.

"What is *actually* going on with you, Sam, and Carly?" Jade asks, though it sounds like more of a demand than anything else.

"It's what we explained before. Sam is dating Carly now, but she's also still with me."

"Yeah, see, that's what doesn't add up to me," Jade drawls. "*Why* would you let her do that?"

"Because they were *miserable*, and—"

"And you get less of Sam," Jade cuts her off.

Cat shakes her head. "No, no it's not like that. She still loves me just as much."

"Sure, I get the part about love being infinite or whatever. But *time* isn't infinite. There's two of you and only one of Sam."

Cat *wants* to defend this choice, if only because Jade's approach to asking about this is making her feel defensive, like Jade thinks she's stupid for letting this happen. Cat doesn't feel stupid. She feels frustrated and sad and *bitter*, but she doesn't feel stupid. "Look, it was the only thing we could do to—"

"To do *what*?" Jade challenges.

"For everyone to be happy!" Cat cries. She can tell she's not explaining herself well.

"Are *you* happy?" Jade asks pointedly.

Cat's throat tightens and her eyes fill with tears. She can't answer Jade for a long moment.

"I...don't know," she finally utters.

"Cat..." Jade starts, her voice already softer.

"I...I *want* to be," Cat tries to explain, her voice breaking a little. "I *wanted* them to be happy. I'm *glad* they're happy, because I love them both so much, but..."

"You feel left out, don't you?" Jade asks. There's a sharp edge to her otherwise soft voice, a small indication of anger, perhaps. When Cat doesn't answer right away, Jade adds, "I know how you feel about Carly. Or felt, anyway."

"I still do," Cat admits quietly.

"But..."

“She doesn’t feel the same way.” Cat looks away.

Jade leans away from her a little, as if scrutinizing her whole body now. “You agreed to this because you were hoping for, like, a *throuple* or whatever.”

Cat nods quietly, but then adds, “But I didn’t want to tell them no just because I wasn’t getting what I wanted. They were going to ruin *everything* by not being able to deal with their feelings.”

“So you end up having to share your girlfriend and get nothing in return,” Jade finishes.

“I don’t—I don’t get *nothing*, I—” But Cat can’t think of a single thing she gains by allowing this, at least, nothing she can put into words. Her eyes blur with tears again. “I *want* to be good,” she tells Jade.

“Uhh.” Jade sounds confused. “You *are* good? Like, most of the time, anyway. Especially compared to someone like me.”

Cat glares at her, wanting to refute Jade’s assessment about herself, but she can’t dwell on that. “No, I mean, I really, *really* believe that letting them have this is the right thing to do.”

“Just a couple of months ago you thought you’d have to break up with Sam because of having a crush. How did you get *here*?”

“Because—you’re the one who made me realize that love is infinite!”

“Yeah,” Jade says slowly, “But I didn’t tell you that to make you think you’d have to go along with whatever Sam wants just because she’s in *love*.”

“That’s not how it is,” Cat argues. She brushes a tear away from her eye. “I realized you were *right*, and I also realized Sam and Carly would be much more miserable apart than together. And *yes*, I thought maybe I could have a chance to be with Carly, too, but even without that, I want to be the kind of person who can be *okay* with this. Because it makes *sense*. Because what you said is *right* and it’s *true* and love is *good* and—”

“Cat, what I said might be true, but that doesn’t mean *I’m* ever going to be in an open relationship,” Jade says gently. “You can *still* have boundaries if you want something different.”

“You—wait.” Cat is confused, and a little upset. “If you—then why did you *tell* me what you did?!”

“I was just trying to make you not feel so guilty about having a crush! Wherever you took that isn’t on me,” Jade replies hotly.

“But if more love in the world is *good*...” Cat tries.

“You’re still allowed to be selfish sometimes if it makes you feel safer,” Jade finishes. She shakes her head. “Look, if you’re all broken up about this, it isn’t going to last anyway. What

used to be great about being with Sam is just going to end up hurting you. You're allowed to have needs of your own."

Cat doesn't voice what she's thinking, that sometimes she's afraid that if she needs *too much*, no one will want her. She thinks about Sam, on the phone in the other room with Carly, the way Cat somehow *knows* they were talking about all the sex they want to have together, the way it made Cat afraid that Sam couldn't even *think* about her in the same way anymore. The way it made Cat feel like old news, like the same old Cat Valentine, who could never be a werewolf, could never be Sam's first, could never be anything as special to Sam as Sam is to her and as Carly is to Sam.

"If this is what you really want, I support you," Jade says gently. "And I'll fight anybody who tries to come at you. But you need to be honest with Sam if this isn't working for you." She tilts her head to meet Cat's eyes. "Will you do that?"

Cat nods, faintly. Finally, she says, "I think I want this. I think I just need more time. I think...I think I'll eventually be happier knowing that Sam is so happy."

Jade nods slightly to show she's listening, then says quietly, "Then what's making you cry right now?"

Cat swallows, tries to blink away her tears. "I'm scared of being forgotten," she admits.

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The group goes to get breakfast at a diner after Jade and Cat pick them up, in keeping with their usual ritual. Tori is *starving*, but not so hungry that she isn't aware of her companions across the table. Sam sits in between Cat and Carly, something that puts Tori on alert, given what she experienced with Sam and Carly last night. But, maybe the opportunities she managed to offer them to reconnect have helped, or maybe they're just better at being conscientious around Cat, because there isn't much about their behavior that would even clue someone in to the fact that they're into each other.

Though, maybe that's also because the two of them seem more interested in their breakfasts than anyone at the table. That much Tori can relate to.

Cat and Jade both seem pretty quiet, which isn't entirely unusual for either of them this early in the morning. Though, now that Tori is halfway through her meal and thinking about it, maybe Cat *is* a little too quiet. Maybe Sam notices, too, because Tori sees her wrap an arm around Cat's waist and draw her a little closer. Cat smiles tiredly and leans against her briefly, but then gently pulls away to continue eating her rainbow sprinkled pancakes.

When they get back to Tori's house, Tori suggests, "Do you guys want to watch a movie or something?" It's a bit half-hearted, because she's tired, but she also knows they may not have a chance to just hang out like this until summer.

Sam and Carly exchange a look, then Sam looks back at Cat. "How are you feeling?" she asks Cat.

“To be honest, I’m pretty tired,” Cat admits.

“I’m pretty beat, myself,” Carly agrees.

Still, they all linger for a moment, perhaps, like Tori, realizing that this is an opportunity for friendship that they’re all passing up. But then Sam shrugs. “Guess we should head home.”

“Yeah,” Cat murmurs reluctantly.

“All right,” Tori says, feeling a mixture of disappointment and relief. “Drive safe, you guys.”

There’s a round of hugs—Tori notices that Sam and Carly *don’t* touch—and then the three guests head out to their respective vehicles to head across town to, probably, get some sleep before finishing homework that evening.

Well, that’s Tori’s plan, anyway.

She and Jade head up to her bedroom, where Tori quickly showers and Jade undresses so they both get under the covers nude and snuggle together. The house is mercifully quiet; Tori’s parents are in Santa Barbara for the weekend, and she doesn’t expect them home until the afternoon, and she hasn’t seen Trina in almost a week. Of course, that doesn’t mean Trina isn’t about to burst into the house in the next five minutes, but Tori figures Trina probably won’t show her face until the afternoon, either.

This could be a good opportunity for some...*intimacy* with Jade. Tori knows it, but she’s also tired, and distracted. And judging by the way Jade holds her, Jade doesn’t seem inclined to invite sex right now, either.

Tori closes her eyes and nestles her head against Jade’s shoulder, her hand coming up to rest on Jade’s breast. Jade breathes out a slight laugh, her common reaction whenever Tori does this; even if she’s exhausted, she’s still a lesbian with a healthy appreciation for her girlfriend’s boobs.

But Tori can’t fall asleep. Even the familiar smell of Jade, sharp like silver, comforting as earth, with the warmth of chocolate, can’t lull her to sleep. Finally, Tori has to accept that she can’t wind down because she keeps thinking about Sam and Carly in the forest. Not in a, like, *sexy* way. But in a way that makes her nervous.

“Jade?” she murmurs, knowing that if Jade is deeply asleep, there’s a good chance that won’t wake her.

But Jade answers right away, with a grunted “Hmm?”

“I’m...worried,” Tori whispers.

She can feel Jade shifting beneath her, and buries her face further into Jade’s neck. Jade stops trying to look at her and Tori feels a hand on her head, stroking her hair. “What’re you worried about?” Jade asks sleepily.

Tori takes a deep breath, wondering how best to condense all the thoughts she's been having, and eventually sums it up with, "I'm worried that what's going on with Sam and Cat and Carly is going to, like, ruin everything."

Jade is moving more now, to the point that Tori has to lift her head and prop herself up on her elbow while Jade repositions herself to face Tori in bed. Jade's eyes look far away and don't quite meet Tori's as she says softly, "I've been having the same fear."

Tori sighs and looks away, toward where her free hand is fidgeting with the corner of a pillowcase. "I'll tell you, last night was kinda rough. Sam and Carly were so *focused* on each other, it was hard for me to even get between them. I've never felt like such a third wheel."

"Because you've never *been* a third wheel for them before," Jade points out. "You've been a connecting point to them before."

"Yeah," Tori agrees, mouth twisting. "It's so obvious that they're *crazy* about each other, and it kinda sounds like things were about to blow up between them, anyway, with all this passion flying around, but...Jade, what if this is our last full moon together as a...as a *pack*?"

She looks up at Jade to see a small smile shape her lips. "I've never heard you use that term. Is that a thing?"

Tori blushes, slightly. "I don't know. Werewolves have families like anybody else, but I guess when it's people you choose to be around, then pack makes sense?"

Jade hums noncommittally, then says, "I'm pretty worried about Cat."

"Me, too," Tori agrees. "Sam said she's taking this kinda hard."

"She is," Jade says evenly. "She wants so badly to be the kind of person who can let Sam and Carly have this, but she's scared of being left behind."

"From what I saw of Sam and Carly last night, I think that's a real fear," Tori shares.

Jade shakes her head. "Maybe I need to go slap some sense into Sam."

"Maybe," Tori chuckles. "Though, watching her, I have no doubt she's totally in love with both of them."

"*Sure*, but just because you have a feeling doesn't mean you have to *do* anything about it," Jade says fiercely. "*Especially* when open relationships are *kinda known* for *not* working."

"Are they?" Tori muses. She tries to think if she's ever actually known anyone who was in one. "Yeah, I mean, I don't know. I don't know how I'd feel until I was in one, I guess."

"You *were* in one," Jade tells her. "You just didn't know it."

Tori stares at her uncomprehendingly. "Huh?"

“You know.” Jade waves a hand. “Old What's-His-Name.” When Tori still doesn’t follow, she adds, “The one who was dating both you and Carly.”

“Oh! *Oooh!*” Tori draws it out in comprehension. “Okay, but to be fair, the problem there was that he was lying about it. Maybe it would’ve made sense for him to have two girlfriends when he split his time that way.”

Jade stares at her uncomprehendingly. “You really think you would’ve been okay with that?”

“Well...” Tori thinks about it. “You know, probably yes, but only because I actually wasn’t that into him?”

“Because you’re so gay,” Jade smirks.

“Because I’m so gay,” Tori agrees, grinning herself. “And, if I’d known he was dating Carly, I probably would have been excited to be connected to her in some way.”

Jade’s brow furrows. “Now you’ve made it kinda weird.”

“But if it was about sharing *you*...” she trails off, and reaches out to possessively grab one of Jade’s breasts.

Jade laughs. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Tori’s smile fades a bit. “You really think their relationships are just going to blow up?”

“I mean, look. I’m not an expert. But it seems to me that the main reasons people open their relationships are: boredom.” She starts counting on her fingers. “Having one foot out the door. Wanting somebody else but being too chicken shit to break up first. Trying to fix a relationship that’s *already* irreparably broken. Trying to retroactively excuse cheating.”

She seems to be trying to think of more reasons, but Tori gets the picture. “You really think that all applies to Sam?”

“Not *all* of it. Maybe just the boredom part, I don’t know. Maybe the cheating part, depending on what counts as cheating. I don’t think she’s trying to leave Cat, I just think she’s being naive about whether she gets to have her cake and eat it too.”

“You know, I’ve never understood that expression. Why *shouldn’t* you get to eat the cake you have?”

“Because if you eat *too much* cake, you get sick,” Jade answers.

Tori shakes her head. “This is how you feel, yet you’re the same girl who told Cat that it’s great to bring more love into the world,” she muses.

“*Yeah*. Because there’s nothing *wrong* with *feelings*. *Actions* are the issue here. I don’t know why Sam and Carly couldn’t just accept they had feelings they couldn’t act on!”

Tori considers that. “Maybe it’s a little harder when you’re...*wilder*.”

Jade rolls her eyes. "Don't tell me werewolves can't control themselves. I've been with you long enough to know better."

"Yeah, but you've also seen *Trina*," Tori widens her eyes theatrically.

"Oh, please, she'd be a nutcase even if she wasn't a werewolf."

"True," Tori chuckles, but sobers quickly. "But I more just mean that...sometimes, being a wolf, can be *clarifying*. Like. It can be harder to hide how you feel when you have wolf senses. I already told you about how I was drawn to you because of how you smelled."

"Okay, but *again*, there's a difference between feeling and action," Jade insists.

"Look, I'm not them, I haven't been in this situation, but what I mean is, maybe they knew action was inevitable. They were willing to cut themselves off from each other entirely if it meant trying to get over each other. Maybe this is an honest effort to stay connected. To stay in a pack with us."

"Maybe," Jade replies skeptically. "But I think the end result is going to be the same."

They lie together quietly for a moment, both thoughtful. Finally, Tori asks, "Do you think they'll last until the next full moon?"

Jade laughs darkly. "Not a chance."

"Yeah," Tori agrees sadly. "I hate to say it, but I think Sam and Carly are going to push Cat too far."

"I think they're already starting to," Jade confirms. "I think it could go a couple of ways. Cat gets pushed too far and breaks up with Sam and then I guess it'll just be me and three wolves at the park." Tori frowns at that. "Carly feels like she doesn't get enough of Sam, there's an ultimatum, and Sam chooses Cat, then, I don't know, we never see Carly again?" Tori's frown deepens; *she'll* see Carly at school, and she doesn't want to go back to trying to balance totally separate friendships with Carly and Sam, because she doesn't want to lose either of them. "Or...it all blows up and Sam ends up single. And then she'll probably show up on your doorstep needing a place to live," Jade smirks.

"Or start roaming the country on her bike again," Tori predicts heavily. "Then we'd never see *her* again."

"Yeah," Jade agrees. After a long pause, she adds. "That would suck."

"This *all* sucks," Tori shifts closer to Jade. "I'm glad I just have you," she murmurs against her neck.

Jade chuckles. "And I can promise that you'll never have to share me with *anyone*."



The rest of Sunday passes quickly; she and Cat take a nap when they get home, and in the afternoon, they both work on homework for a little while. The plan, when they'd talked about it days ago, had been for tonight to be a wolfsbane night, so they could enjoy some intimacy under the power of the full moon. Sam is looking forward to it. She's been kinda wound up since she shared those quick, furtive kisses with Carly at Shadow Creek Park.

But as the afternoon drags on, with the two of them absorbed in separate tasks, Cat breaks Sam out of her focus on her art with a question. "Did you still want to take wolfsbane tonight?"

Sam blinks, feeling her focus and her flow drain away. She switches her gaze over to Cat, sitting at the dining nook with textbooks in front of her. "Um, yeah? That was the plan, right?"

"Sure," Cat says listlessly, "I just wondered if you still even wanted to."

Sam narrows her eyes. It seems pretty obvious that this isn't actually a question about what *she* wants. "Are you okay?" she asks Cat directly.

"Yeah," Cat answers in that same lifeless tone.

"You don't *sound* like it." Sam abandons her easel and moves closer to where Cat is seated.

"Don't worry about me," Cat says simply, offering a bland smile.

Sam can feel that she's being shut out, and she wrestles with whether to push Cat or not. Eventually, she just says, "Look, I'd like to take wolfsbane tonight, but we don't have to do anything you don't want to do. Seriously. I'm fine just watching TV with you or whatever. I just want to spend some time with you."

"Sure," Cat answers, sounding like she doesn't quite believe her.

"Seriously, I—"

"I heard you," Cat interrupts, shutting down the conversation. "Then I'll make dinner suitable for human hands tonight. That's all I wanted to know."

"Okay," Sam agrees reluctantly.

Sam takes wolfsbane with plenty of time before dusk, opting for the regular capsule rather than the tincture, considering Cat's apparent ambivalence about whether she changes or not. Later on, Cat makes cheeseburgers for dinner. Sam supposes that makes sense as a meal for human hands, though she thinks she'd have no problem wolfing down a couple of these as a...wolf. No pun intended. They're delicious and juicy and well-seasoned and, as she declares through a mouthful of meat, "Better than Inside Out!"

Cat giggles appreciatively. "Did I ever tell you that I can make their secret sauce?"

Sam lowers her burger, eyes wide. "What? No. Wait. How long have you known how to do that?"

“A while,” is all Cat offers.

“Why haven’t you *made* it yet?”

“Because I think my own sauce is better,” Cat answers primly. “You just said so yourself.”

“Hrm,” Sam hums, taking another big bite. Then she nods. “Yeah. You’re right.” Another bite. “We should bottle this stuff.”

Cat fully brightens, for the first time all day. “Do you think Dice could sell it for us?”

“Um. Yeah. Without a doubt,” Sam answers. “Might help since we’ve had to cut back on babysitting with school and everything.” In fact, without financial help from Cat’s family, Sam knows they’d be in trouble. It’s kind of the opposite of her relationship with her mom, back when she still lived in Seattle, who’d usually only talk to Sam to see if she had money. Cat’s parents only talk to Cat to see if she *needs* money.

It’s opposite, but still kinda sad, now that Sam thinks about it.

After dinner, they end up in front of the TV. They realize there’s a marathon of old *That’s a Drag* episodes on (it’s *still* kinda trippy to look from the TV to their living room and see all the same furniture), which they are both obviously excited to watch. Sam lets her mind wander a little as she sits and snuggles with Cat on the couch. This is the show that first drew them together, the first indication either of them had that they actually might have something in common. Their first point of connection.

It was also kind of the first thing about Cat that made Sam consider she might not be 100% straight, despite all appearances. *That’s a Drag* is a goofy, silly show, and it had a lot of fans, but Cat’s elevated level of appreciation for the show struck Sam as kind of...queer, in a way that had been hard to articulate, and still is, even now. Of course, now she knows Cat well enough to realize that being *very* passionate about weird things is kind of how Cat operates, just in general, but at the time, Cat’s love of the gender-bent, queer-coded sitcom that toed the line of subversion without being *too* unconventional had struck Sam as *interesting*.

And, of course, Sam had been right. Cat definitely isn’t straight.

The memories are making her wax nostalgic as she thinks about the early days, when they were still getting to know each other. The way they’d fight, but they’d always find a way to make up. The way it was so important to Sam that she stick around, even when it felt difficult or impossible or like just jumping on her bike and riding off would be *so* much simpler. Sam had stayed, because she *liked* Cat, basically right away. And Cat had told her she fell in love with Sam quickly, herself.

But it had taken Sam time to let down her guard, to lower her walls, to let Cat in. To trust her, with her biggest secret, with her vulnerability, with her *heart*. There were so many reasons for Sam to want to pull away, to want to hide, to want to *run*, but Cat had been patient with her. Cat had loved her enough to let her take her time.

Sam gazes at Cat now and wonders if Cat will be able to love her enough, now, to let Sam figure out this new stage of their relationship, when Sam is loving more and deeper than she ever has in her life, and it's *wonderful*, but scary. She knows there's a chance she could lose everything.

Especially because she's also learned enough about Cat to know that patience isn't always her strong suit. She's been patient with Sam for *so long*, but maybe Sam has already run through all of it.

Maybe Cat doesn't have much more to extend to her.

Sam ruminates on all of this, heart *aching* with how much she loves Cat, the endless sweetness of her, the way she shows Sam she cares in a million little gestures. Sam had promised to always choose her and, while she hopes it doesn't come to it in this case, she has no doubt that she will, if she must.

Cat, attention absorbed by her favorite show, gradually notices Sam watching her. She turns and her laughing features soften into an affectionate warmth. "What?" she asks.

"I just love you," Sam tells her, with more candor and affection than she usually speaks with.

Cat gazes back at her for a long moment, smiling back at her. "I love you, too," she replies, then leans forward to kiss her.

And, while Sam has been anticipating sex for most of the day, while it's *kind of* a big reason they'd initially planned for her to take wolfsbane, it catches her a little off guard when things begin to escalate in that direction, at Cat's instigation.

But Cat doesn't stay in charge for long. Even without the energizing effect of the wolfsbane tincture, Sam still quickly flips them so that she's on top of Cat, kissing her desperately as clothes gradually disappear, until they're grinding together on the couch, and all the erotic energy Sam feels like has been stored inside her chest pours out of her onto Cat in a frenzy of excitement.

Sam feels so *grateful*, and she doesn't allow herself to get totally lost in sensation. She looks at Cat as she's getting close, knowing how that kind of connection is important to her girlfriend, and breathes out, "*God*, I love you."

A whimper from Cat is her only answer, as Cat's eyes close and her head tips back, and Sam buries her face in Cat's neck and, with a scrape of teeth just above her collarbone, begins to come.

It isn't until she's recovering in Cat's arms that anything feels...off.

"What do you need?" Sam finally asks when she finds her voice.

"Nothing," Cat tells her in a quiet voice.

Sam lifts her head to look at her, surprised. It's not unheard of for Cat to not want her own orgasm, but it is pretty damn uncommon. Cat gazes back, looking slightly...*guarded*, is the

best word Sam can think of. “Are you sure?” Sam asks doubtfully.

“I’m sure,” Cat replies, and Sam feels Cat’s hand on her head, coaxing her to lie back down against Cat’s chest.

Sam lets herself be held, but she thinks back to the moments just before her orgasm, in which she’d attempted to connect with her girlfriend, and realizes...Cat hadn’t *wanted* to connect with her.

Sam’s heart sinks. She’d been feeling *so* grateful and appreciative of her girlfriend, and she’d thought Cat had initiated sex for the same reason, but...it’s clear to Sam that something is off.

And she doesn’t know how to make it better if Cat keeps insisting that nothing is wrong.

Sam doesn’t push. She tells herself that Cat is working on this on her own, and that there’s not a lot she can do except be there for her, and love her. And she’s already doing that, she’s *been* doing that. She figures it’s best to take Cat at her word, that she *wants* this, she just needs time.

And Sam is giving her time, too. She isn’t going to see Carly for two more days, for Cat. That has to count for something, right?

Sam allows herself to accept the state of things, figuring if she doesn’t rock the boat, then maybe things will settle into place, the way they all seem to want. So she snuggles with Cat, until they gradually manage to untangle themselves and gather the clothes they’ve tossed around the room and put on a few of them. After that, they finish another episode of *That’s a Drag*, and then it’s time to start getting ready for bed.

At least in bed, things feel right. The way they fit together, the way Cat pushes closer to her in her sleep. It feels normal, comfortable, *safe*.

Sam falls asleep thinking about how Carly was the closest thing she had to a home as a child, but how she and Cat, together, made the first *real* home she’s ever had in her life.

Monday is incredibly typical, but also uniquely awful, because it feels like one of the *longest* days Sam has ever experienced. She and Carly hadn’t texted much the day before, probably because resting and homework took priority, but today, over breakfast, Sam gets a text.

**Can’t stop thinking about how I**

**get to see you tomorrow**

Sam tries to hide her grin with a big bite of a microwaved breakfast sandwich (Cat’s solution to full moon mornings on a school day, so that Sam can have a protein-packed breakfast without Cat having to spend too much time cooking in the morning if she needs to study or sleep in) while Cat hums to herself as she pours some orange juice. Sam watches her

surreptitiously, and when Cat turns to rinse her breakfast dishes and put them in the dishwasher, Sam replies.

**Really can't wait to kiss you again**

The reply is quick.

**Is that what we're going to do?**

**Kiss all night?**

"Did you drink some juice?" Cat interrupts Sam's thoughts as she stares at the text.

"Uh. No. Just coffee."

Cat makes a little *tsk tsk* sound behind her teeth. "You should have some juice, too. It's part of a balanced breakfast!"

"Alright, I'll get some," Sam acquiesces.

"I'll pour it for you!" Cat offers cheerfully, and heads over to the fridge to do just that.

Sam picks back up her phone, wondering if she can reply while Cat focuses on pouring a glass of juice, but in the end, she pockets her phone to finish her breakfast while Cat goes through her school bag on the other side of the dining nook, making sure she has everything she needs for her classes today.

When Cat is in the bathroom brushing her teeth and getting ready for the day, Sam is out front gathering her art supplies, which gives her a chance to reply.

**Nah, we'll do more than that**

**We can, ya know**

**Talk or whatever**

This time, she's the one who has to wait for a response. It actually comes just as she and Cat have parted ways on campus and Sam is walking into the art building.

**I can think of better things we could  
be doing with our mouths**

Sam has to step aside and stop walking because her knees are *weak*.

**Don't worry**

**I still remember how to rock your world**

She gets to her classroom (early, because Cat keeps them on schedule) and checks the response.

**Oh god**

**I should not find something  
that corny to be hot**

Sam frowns. Okay, it wasn't her *best* attempt at flirting, but she'd kind of just been hoping to evoke memories of all the (really awesome) sex they've had. Maybe she shouldn't have relied on a cliché. She can do better.

**It's not corny**

**It's horny**

**Wow, yep**

**That was bad**

**Horny is dead**

**Thanks, though now maybe I can pay**

**attention in class today**

**Yeah right**

**All day you're gonna be thinking**

**about my fingers inside you and**

**how good it feels when I make**

**you come**

When a reply doesn't come right away, Sam starts setting up her easel and drawing pad for the day's class, but checks her phone before class actually begins.

**Damn it Sam**

**Now I can't think of anything else**

**You're welcome**

**You're a gank**

**But you're my gank**

**Weird**

**But true**

**Can't wait til tomorrow**

**Okay, Tori's looking at me weird**

**Gotta go**

There's no reply. Sam guesses Carly really did put her phone away. Oh, well. Class is about to start anyway.

Things continue along that vein for most of the day, when the two of them find a moment to text, they do. On campus, between classes, it's easy to exchange texts. Except for the window of time when Sam meets up with Cat for lunch. She tries to listen while Cat chatters happily about music theory and acting exercises and whatever else she did in class that day, but it's hard when some of it is stuff Sam isn't exactly well-versed in, and when she feels like she can only focus on her PearPhone, her connection to Carly.

Her mind wanders to the current thread of her exchanges with Carly, in which Carly is spinning out a scenario about how Sam will probably not get past being pinned to Carly's apartment door before she has her first orgasm of the evening tomorrow night. She crosses her legs, imagining Carly's mouth on her neck, one hand pressed against her lower back, other hand slipping inside—

Sam realizes abruptly that Cat asked her a question. It takes her a second to parse it out and she takes a bite of her sandwich to buy herself time. Then she answers, "Class was fine. You know. Same old drawing stuff. Negative space and all that." She waves a hand.

Cat nods, looking attentive, then finally answers, "Oh. I see."

Sam chuckles, "Sorry, it's hard to make art classes sound interesting. I can show you what I worked on today after I finish my lunch."

"Yeah, I don't want you to get meat grease on your work," Cat smiles.

"Me, neither," Sam agrees. She considers this for a moment. "I wonder if that could be, like, a new technique in art though."

"Grease stains on paper?" Cat asks skeptically.

"Sure. Like. It could make it look translucent maybe?"

It's a little like whiplash, to go from texting with Carly to discussing the potential artistic merit of spreading beef tallow onto a canvas with Cat. But it's fun, and she and Cat laugh together and when Sam gets up to go decide if she wants more for lunch, she has a chance to reply to Carly.

She does hate that she feels a bit guilty about how relieved she feels to get back to her phone, though.

At home that afternoon, Sam barely gets any homework done because of texting with Carly. She tries to make sure she only does it when Cat clearly isn't paying attention to her, is obviously absorbed in her own work. She hopes she's actually being discreet, but it's also difficult to realize sometimes how much she's been drawn into her conversation with Carly.



until something else pulls her attention, and she realizes she's been openly staring at her phone for who knows how long.

But Cat seems fairly normal; her head is bent over her work, she occasionally makes thoughtful grunts or hums as she reads or watches videos on her PearPad and takes notes. If she's noticed Sam is texting a lot, she doesn't seem concerned.

As the afternoon pushes on toward evening, however, Cat eventually takes off her headphones and speaks to Sam, who, thankfully, is actually looking at something school-related at that moment. "It's getting pretty close to sunset," she observes.

"I'll be ready," Sam smiles. She perks up, "Are you making meatballs tonight?"

"I was thinking maybe *meatloaf*," Cat raises her eyebrows emphatically.

Sam groans, "I can't *wait*."

Cat checks her watch and sets down her headphones. "I can start it now." She begins to get up from the dining nook where she has her homework spread out.

"Sure. But first." Sam stands up from the couch and crosses the room to meet her, blocking her from the kitchen. "You should kiss me."

Cat chuckles. "Should I?" she asks, batting her eyelashes.

"Before my mouth isn't made for kissing," Sam replies. Cat watches her, but doesn't seem to be about to make any moves toward her. "Please?" Sam says, letting her lip stick out slightly in as much of a pout as she'll deign to express.

Cat laughs again, shaking her head, and Sam feels fingers in her hair as Cat pulls her in for a kiss. Sam closes her eyes to let herself get immersed in Cat, wanting the chance to kiss her thoroughly, to express her affection, to alleviate her guilt, to offer her reassurance and love.

But it's over quicker than Sam might like. Cat pulls away after only a moment, leans in to offer one more brief peck, then pats at Sam's hip to urge her to move. "You'd better let me get started. If I let you stay too hungry as a wolf, you might eat *me*," she lilts humorously.

Sam hesitates, wanting more, feeling oddly hurt that Cat doesn't seem to feel the same way, then she steps aside to let Cat go to the kitchen. "Eating you. We wouldn't want *that*," she tries for snark, earning a small chuckle from her girlfriend.

While Cat begins to get out cookware and ingredients, Sam checks the time. She has plenty of it, but she decides, "Guess I'd better go to the bedroom and get ready to change," anyway.

Cat flashes her a grin but then immediately focuses back on cooking. "Okay! See you soon."

"I love you." Sam just wants to say it one more time before she can't.

Another brief bit of eye contact from Cat before her gaze drops and she replies, "I love you, too" to a package of ground beef.

Sam can't be too mad, when she's said as much to me before. It probably doesn't mean anything except that Cat is busy.

Once in the bedroom, Sam strips down and sits on her bed with her phone. She and Carly are both planning to change tonight, so she knows they're about to finish texting for the evening, too.

**Almost time**

**Getting there**

**I was trying to finish some reading**

**for class tomorrow but**

**Guess I'll have to do it in the morning**

**Don't get up too early**

**You're gonna need energy for**

**tomorrow night**

**Oh don't you worry**

**I'll be ready for you**

**Good**

**Fuck in like 24 hours**

**We're gonna be doing it**

**Funny**

**I'm naked and waiting for**

**the moon right now**

**Tomorrow I'll be naked and  
waiting for you**

**You can't be naked  
Don't you have to let  
me into your building?**

**Okay, fine, ruin the fantasy**

**Not ruined at all  
The fantasy is that I get you naked**

**Can't argue with that**

It doesn't feel real, that so soon, they're going to have time together again.

But for now, Sam feels the jolt in her stomach and the twinge in her spine that lets her know it's time. She struggles to text with hands that morph before her eyes.

**See you tomorrow**

Just before her phone screen turns off, she sees Carly's reply.

**Can't wait**

Sam guesses she'll have to find out what that means tomorrow.

## **"Showers" Joy**

Carly spends the night alone in her apartment as a wolf, something she's pretty used to at this point. It's never ideal, but it's perfectly manageable. She figures it'll be easier to pass the time if she can just let herself relax into her wolf senses instead of sitting with a human brain too fixated on sex to think about much of anything else.

It works, mostly. Carly watches TV for a while and then falls asleep early. When she wakes up as a human, she immediately texts Sam.

**I get to kiss you today**

Then she naps for a little while longer before she gets up to finish the homework she'd neglected the night before and prepare for her day at school.

Much like yesterday, she and Sam are exchanging text messages when they have free moments, and, much like yesterday, Tori has noticed that Carly's attention is pretty focused on her phone. She and Tori have several classes together this semester, and, along with the class she's taking with Andre, it means Carly at least feels comfortable in most of her classes because she knows someone.

Today, though, she arrives at the classroom first, and she notices Tori entering the room and taking her typical seat next to her more by scent than because she actually spots her with her eyes. This is because her eyes are occupied running over the words Sam has sent her as they try to pin down the exact minute when they're going to be reunited, how long they're going to have to wait, what they're going to do first.

Tori doesn't say anything at first, and although a part of Carly's brain knows she's here, it takes a second for her conscious brain to kick into gear and lower her phone enough to say, "Hey!"

Tori gives her a kind of wan smile. "Hey," she answers, pulling a handful of pens out of her monstrous bag and sifting through them. Carly has noticed that Tori always uses the same purple pen to take notes in class; she wonders why Tori even carries the other pens, since she never uses them.

Carly is about to follow up when her phone buzzes in her hand and her attention is sucked right back to Sam.

She feels a little guilty when the professor starts class a little bit later and she realizes that she and Tori only exchanged the most basic of pleasantries. Usually they start the day with a lot more to say to each other.

When class is over, Carly can't help but check her phone right away. Nothing new from Sam. Probably she was busy in class, too. Beside her, Tori is gathering up her notebook and tucking things back into her bag. She's ready before Carly and she seems to hesitate, like she isn't sure if she should wait for Carly, so Carly says something.

"Hey, hold on."

Tori looks over at her expectantly as Carly struggles to shove her notebook back into her bag. Why do bags always fight you when you're in a hurry? "Sorry about earlier," Carly says, trying to push stray papers out of the way of her bag's zipper.

Tori shrugs. "It's fine."

"No. It sucked. I suck." Her zipper gets jammed by a chunk of paper. She growls under her breath and tugs harder. "This *bag* sucks! What the *hell*?" she curses.

"Here." Tori takes the bag from her with minimal resistance and deftly pushes her notebook in straighter and zips it closed cleanly, then hands it back.

Carly sighs. "Thank you." She slings her bag over her shoulder and follows Tori out of the classroom.

"So..." Tori drawls.

"What?" Carly asks.

"Tonight's the night, right?"

A slow smile blooms over Carly's face. She can't hide it even if she wants to. "Yep. Tonight," she says dreamily.

"How're you feeling about it?" Tori asks.

Carly shoots her a mildly incredulous look. "Um. Excited? I can barely think about anything else."

"You're not nervous?"

"Why would I be?"

"I don't know," Tori says pensively. "I've never gotten back together with an ex. I guess I feel like it might be weird."

"All your exes are guys, though, right? So you wouldn't want to, anyway."

"Okay, good point," Tori laughs. "But your whole *situation* is a little...unusual."

Carly waits to see if she's going to elaborate. She doesn't. "I know. But I'm *really* not thinking about anything other than the sex I'm going to finally have tonight."

Tori looks mildly chagrined. “Sure, right. I get it,” she says quickly.

“Sorry if that was an overshare,” Carly says. “It’s just been a while since I—nope, *that’s* the overshare.”

Tori laughs. “It’s not as though I don’t know exactly what you and Sam are so hyped up about tonight.”

“Yeah. I guess it’s just weird since Sam’s your friend, too.”

Tori is quiet for a moment, then says, “No. What makes it weird is that *Cat* is my friend.”

Carly feels a pang of...guilt? Shame? The sting of judgment? But the truth is, she’s barely thought about Cat since seeing her the morning after Shadow Creek Park. And on the one hand, it’s not as though *she’s* responsible for any of Cat’s emotions about all of this, or managing them. But on the other hand...Cat *was* her friend. Still *is* her friend. Hopefully. Carly would like her to be.

But if she thinks too hard about what Cat might be feeling about all this, it might take all the fun out of fucking Cat’s girlfriend. Who is also *her* girlfriend.

“Cat’s my friend, too,” Carly tells Tori warily.

“I know, I know,” Tori says quickly. “Look, I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’m not trying to shame you. I *want* you to go have really awesome sex tonight so you can tell me all about it tomorrow!” She frowns. “Or, maybe don’t. I don’t know. Now that I think about it, it might be too weird.”

“Tell you what. I’ll just tell you how it was.”

“That’s fair.”

“But I already know the answer to that.”

“Yeah?” Tori asks with a bit of a sly smile.

“Yeah. It’s going to be *incredible*.”

-

When they get home from class that day, Sam drops her backpack near the front door and hurries to the bathroom to take her second shower of the day—a rarity for her, but even she can’t be too upset about the time and effort spent lathering up and rinsing off under the steamy spray. Yeah, showering is boring and too much work, but over time, she’s learned to appreciate the benefits of having a clean body and how sexual partners react to it.

All she can think about is how Carly is already at her apartment, already showered, waiting for her. Sam has to wait on campus for Cat to get out of class later than she does on Tuesdays and Thursdays, something that isn’t usually a problem because it gives her a push to work on homework while she waits since she has nothing else to do, but today, she’d been annoyed.

She hates that she was annoyed, but she *was*, and it had been difficult to ignore the selfish impulse to just drive off to go be with Carly and leave Cat to find her own way home.

But she also knows that as much as she was *tempted* to do just that, it's also something that would never, *could* never, happen. She *loves* Cat, and she'd never do anything to deliberately hurt her like that. As much as her body and mind and libido are all absolutely *yearning* for Carly, her love for Cat remains. It balances everything out.

It's a good thing, too, because after her shower, she redresses quickly and gets ready to go, but that balancing force prevents her from simply rushing out the door. She slows to a casual stroll as she heads back to the front of the apartment, where Cat is sitting at the dining nook with her textbooks. As much as Cat must know how eager Sam is to get to Carly, there's no reason for Sam to rub it in. She wants to be careful with Cat's feelings, she wants to be gentle with her. Because she *loves* her.

"I'm gonna head out," she says, as casually as she might tell Cat she's swinging by Tubba Chicken for a midday snack.

"Okay," Cat replies, looking up from her work with a forced smile.

Sam pauses uncertainly. She can *tell* that Cat isn't exactly happy about all of this, but she's doing exactly what they agreed to. She's following Cat's rules.

She steps a little closer. Cat looks back up at her, slightly wary.

"Hey," Sam says softly. "I love you, you know?" She holds out her arms, inviting a hug. She'd *like* a kiss, but she'll let Cat take the lead on that.

Cat gazes at her blankly for a long moment, but then she's on her feet quickly, flinging herself at Sam in one of those hugs that feel too strong, too firm for someone so small. Sam holds her tightly, feeling the way their bodies align, the way their heads rest against each other, chins on shoulders.

"I love you," Cat whispers, then draws away. "See you later?" she says as she sits back down.

It takes Sam a moment to realize that it's a question. "Of course. Be back later," she replies, then heads out the patio door toward her motorcycle.

She rides across town to Carly's apartment, weaving in and out of traffic a little more recklessly than she might normally ride, but she doesn't care. All she cares about is getting to Carly as fast as she possibly can.

Because she feels like every second she's spending *not* kissing Carly is bringing her closer to death.

She pulls up in front of Carly's apartment and slides her bike into a parallel parking spot that's maybe a little small, but oh well, right now, she can't even care about the possibility that her bike, the most precious object in the world to her, might get dinged by someone

trying to drive away. She immediately reaches into her pocket to pull out her PearPhone and text Carly.

**I'm here**

Immediately after she sends the text, she hears a voice. "Hey."

She looks up, startled, to see Carly standing in the doorway of the entrance to her building, not moving, just staring at Sam with wide, dark eyes and a slightly awestruck expression.

Sam pulls off her helmet and gives her hair a compulsory shake. "Hey." She swings her leg off the seat of her bike, then turns back to Carly and waves her phone at her. "That was fast."

"I was waiting," Carly says simply. She smiles, one of those sweet grins that make her eyes crinkle. Carly lifts her chin to gestured behind her. "You coming?" she asks.

Sam nearly trips over the curb as she walks toward Carly. Carly stays in the doorway, holding the door open, until Sam is there, then she smiles again, a bigger, fuller expression this time, and steps back to let Sam take the door.

"This way," she says unnecessarily as they begin walking through the building's front lobby.

Sam follows her out another door to a courtyard, and they take a set of stairs up to the second floor apartments. They follow a partially enclosed hallway, past several different numbered doors, until Carly stops at one. "I just realized I've never seen your apartment," Sam blurts.

Carly laughs softly. "Is that really what you're excited about right now?"

"No. Nope." Carly is still looking at her with an amused smile, so Sam gestures emphatically toward the door. "Come on, *open* it!"

Carly's expression softens. "I've missed you," she says wistfully, then unlocks and pushes open her apartment door.

Sam steps inside and is only able to take in a few details—the scent of Carly concentrated in one space and the way it briefly takes her back to the Seattle apartment where she spent so much time in her formative years. The faint sense of ambient sound in the building through the walls, sounds regular humans probably don't notice. Visual impressions: bare walls, basic furniture, an inviting purple bedspread, the way the stark white of the kitchen appliances and cabinets stands out.

But she only has a brief moment to orient herself before Carly is in front of her and kissing her.

Sam feels like her knees are going weak and she wraps her arms around Carly's waist, kissing back. She hardly realizes they're moving until she finds herself leaning against the



door to Carly's apartment, hardly realizes she's forgotten to breathe until she sucks in an audible breath through her nose, no intention of separating their mouths as they keep kissing.

Finally, Carly pulls away and looks down at Sam with a soft, satisfied grin. "Feels like I had to wait *forever* to do that," she breathes.

"I thought about taking the car," Sam blurts, feeling some strange need to explain this and seeing Carly's brows knit together curiously. "'Cause I showered. But the motorcycle was quicker, it's just, I might smell a little like—"

Carly laughs softly. "You *do* smell a bit like LA. Like exhaust and asphalt. But also," she leans closer and inhales deeply, "You smell *exactly* like I remember."

Sam decides there's no reason to wait any longer for their next kiss and tugs Carly even closer, reconnecting their lips, letting the kisses build from slow, exploratory kisses that savor their reconnection to hungry, frantic ones that clarify just *how long* this desire has been building. It's been *more* than just a handful of days that they've been waiting for this. Sam knows this has been almost *two years* in the making, that all the time spent apart hadn't actually led them in different directions, but brought them back together, had created a longing for one another that is finally being sated now, with passionate kisses and wandering hands.

Sam knows that she's learned that no one can replace Carly, that Carly's love is special, but she also knows now that, as much as she might have wanted her to be, Cat isn't a replacement for Carly. Her connection with Cat is an entirely different and new kind of love, not lesser in any way. Just not Carly.

And right now, rediscovering the wealth of love and affection she and Carly can share is about all she can think about.

Sam pushes closer, instincts shaped from kissing Cat seeking to take control in the moment, to lead Carly toward a bed or a couch, but Carly pushes back, and Sam feels her shoulders thud against the apartment door. The impact halts their kissing for a moment, and Sam meets Carly's eyes, taking in the way they sparkle darkly, the way her full lips turn up in an inviting half-smile. "Didn't I tell you you wouldn't get past my front door before I made you come for the first time?" she teases.

Her whole body trembling, Sam pulls Carly into her to kiss her again. She tears her mouth away to press kisses in a messy line toward Carly's ear. "Not if I make you come first," she growls, pushing closer, letting her hands slip beneath Carly's shirt to press fingertips into the flesh of her lower back.

She gets pushed back against the door *again*, harder this time, and Carly keeps her there by pressing her hips against Sam's, entangling their legs. She wears a challenging smirk as they stare at each other, catching their breath. "You *used* to listen to me," she observes.

"Things change, especially when I know what I want," Sam tells her. It's not that she *doesn't* want Carly to pin her up against the door and fuck her, but there's a part of Sam that feels like she doesn't want to wait any longer to have Carly writhing beneath her. That *giving* to Carly

is what she needs, that offering her body and its services can make up for all the time they've spent apart, all the angst and pain they put each other through trying to pretend they weren't in love.

"Guess I'll need to retrain you." Carly's hand slips up the front of Sam's shirt, running over her stomach. It tickles slightly, and Sam clenches her stomach and reaches to grab Carly's hand.

"Nah, I've never been that good at being good," Sam says, and this time, she steps aside and circles around Carly, tugging her toward the center of the room, away from the door, and drawing her in for another kiss.

There's a sharp inhale from Carly at her action, and a grasping at Sam's side. Sam grabs the back of Carly's head, fingers tugging in her hair as they circle each other in the patch of carpet between the door and the couch that serves as the apartment's tiny foyer. She feels Carly's teeth on her lip, sinking down firmly enough to draw out a gasp from Sam, Carly's fingernails digging along her back, and Sam nearly tears the shirt Carly's wearing trying to pull it up over her head.

They have to stop kissing long enough for Carly's shirt to come off, and Carly takes the opportunity to make Sam's shirt follow, and Sam takes in the pale skin of Carly's torso, and how *delectable* it is to look at, even still covered by her bra, knowing there's more to uncover, knowing that Sam will soon be allowed to kiss it, *taste* it as much as she might like.

Carly is grinning broadly now, and grabs Sam's belt to pull them together once more. "You're going to make me fight you for what I want, aren't you?" she asks playfully.

"Only because I want you more," Sam replies.

Carly laughs, "*Impossible*." And they're kissing again.

Somehow, through the haze of hands and mouth and skin, Sam finds herself topless, jeans unbuttoned and halfway down her hips, being pushed onto the couch by Carly, who straddles her, wearing just underwear and a bra. She sinks down against Sam, and Sam feels teeth at her throat, a hand pinning her right hand against the back of the couch, the other hand searching for her left hand and instead running nails down her side, making Sam tremble as she pants in Carly's ear, overwhelmed by the sensation of her skin, the scent of her, the awareness of Carly's arousal filling the room, filling *Sam*.

She runs nails up one of Carly's inner thighs and presses her fingers between her legs, feeling Carly through the fabric of the panties.

She feels Carly writhe as she pushes her hips against Sam's hand, hears her whimper in Sam's ear. Sam grins, feeling victorious, as she slips her fingers inside Carly's undergarment, feeling her wet against her fingertips, letting her push herself against Sam's hand. "You just can't resist, can you?" Sam teases.

Carly straightens, hands against Sam's shoulders for balance as she stares down at her with hazy eyes, hips swaying. "*Fuck*," she murmurs.

“As you wish,” Sam intones, forgetting, for a moment, that this is a joke she shares with Cat, though Carly seems to get it as she grins.

Sam shifts her weight to the side, arms wrapping around Carly’s body as she maneuvers her onto her back on the couch, moving quickly to hover over her. She gets tangled in her jeans, which prevent her from entwining her legs with Carly’s, and she has to take a moment to kick them off, which Carly doesn’t seem to mind given the hungry way she watches the action. But then Sam leans over her, covering Carly’s body with hers, pressing their skin together.

They get lost in kissing again, and Sam interlaces the fingers of one of her hands with Carly’s, pressing the back of her hand down against the couch, leaning her weight onto it as she attempts to reach between their bodies to touch Carly again.

But instead, Carly’s hips lift, and Sam feels her firm thigh press between Sam’s legs.

She groans out loud at the pressure and friction against her, pushing back against her as Carly repeats the motion, starting them on a steady rhythm, grinding together. Sam presses her face against Carly’s shoulder, letting herself enjoy all the sensations, feeling Carly’s flesh between her teeth, pushing their hips together harder, firm jolts that make the air rush out of Carly on impact in little moans of triumph.

Sam could come this way. She knows that. But she isn’t about to let Carly win. She raises her hips, lifts her body, putting space between them, and stares down at Carly.

Carly looks gleeful. “Let’s take this to the bed,” she suggests.

Yeah, fuck the couch. Not enough room. Sam stands up on wobbly legs and offers Carly a hand.

Carly takes her hand, but then moves so quickly that Sam barely follows and ends up behind Sam, arms wrapped around her, one hand still holding Sam’s, keeping her in place.

Sam feels kisses against her shoulder and neck as Carly begins walking her toward the bed, but before they get there, Sam feels Carly push her forward, and she bends at the waist, catching herself on the back of the couch, to find herself bent over, Carly flush against her and hovering over her, arm still wrapped around her.

“These are coming *off*,” she commands, and Sam feels Carly’s free hand tugging at her underwear.

“Fine.” Carly clearly needs both hands to accomplish this, so Sam wriggles her hand free of Carly’s and holds herself up on the back of the couch with both hands, letting Carly behind her tug her undergarment down her legs.

Moments later, Carly is back to standing behind her, leaning over her, pressing her skin against Sam’s. Her hand wraps around Sam’s body, fingertips trailing down her stomach, past her hip, slipping between Sam’s legs.

Sam groans, pushing back against her, one hand reaching behind her to grab at Carly's hip. "Though we were going to the bed," she manages breathlessly.

Carly hums thoughtfully. "I don't know. Maybe I'd rather take you like this."

Fuck that. Sam pushes back against her, knocking one of Carly's legs with her own enough to put her off balance so she can turn around in Carly's embrace. Carly grabs her to keep her balance, but Sam is already facing her, smirking, and kisses her, one hand wrapping around her to dig fingernails into her back, then deftly unhooking her bra. She walks, guiding Carly to the bed as Carly still holds onto her, as if afraid she's going to be knocked off balance again, until they're close enough that Sam just pushes her onto her back onto that inviting purple bedspread.

Carly looks surprised to end up on her back, and Sam grins down at her ferally before reaching for the waistband of her underwear, which she practically tears off in her haste to get it off Carly's body.

And finally, they're both naked, Sam is standing before Carly. She takes in her smooth, pale skin, accented with pink scratches and bruises from nails and teeth, takes in her wild, dark hair, her deep, wide eyes, her full lips, plumped and pink.

Sam climbs on top of her, only to have Carly immediately flip them, and they're back to moving together, grinding, but they're naked this time, and Sam feels flesh against her fingernails, Carly's lip between her teeth, and they rapidly get lost in each other, pressing together and rolling and flipping and slipping and sliding their flesh together. Mouths on mouths, mouths on breasts, hands grasping and pinning and pressing and touching and gripping as their bodies move, until passion overtakes them both. Just the right amount of pressure and friction and pure sensuality brings them both to orgasm, one right after another, blurring together, building together, aftershocks ricocheting between them, until they lie together, unmoving, breathing hard, still clutching each other close.

"God. *Fuck*. That was..." Carly pants.

"I know," Sam replies, in the same state. They're lying side by side, staring at each other, limbs still half wrapped around each other.

Carly closes her eyes and takes in a deep breath, seeming to ground herself. Sam lets her eyes roam over her fair skin, taking note of each spot that shows evidence of Sam's love—the bite marks, the bruises, the scratches, the sweat. "I may have left some...marks." She can't hide the note of pride in her voice.

Carly turns onto her back and stretches, letting Sam get an even better look. "Don't care," she murmurs. She turns her head, making eye contact again. "I have to say. That didn't exactly go as I expected."

Sam snorts. "You thought I was going to let you fuck me against the door."

Carly chuckles. "Well, I thought it was a possibility. But I actually thought this would be... sweeter? Not that I'm complaining," she adds quickly. "This was *exactly* what I needed. I just

didn't *know* it was what I needed."

Sam considers this, how all their dirty texting over the past couple of days had them imagining a *very* passionate reunion, but...*yeah*, they hadn't spun out fantasies *quite* like the wild ferocity that had bloomed between them once they actually were alone together. "Full moon," she states.

Carly nods slowly. "Yeah. That's part of it." They both have enough experience to know the effect the full moon has on libido, and it's just ended. Sam thinks back to the first time they really had sex under the full moon, the way their feral instincts took over, and it looked...a lot like this, actually.

But she also thinks she knows what Carly means. They had both been just *completely* taken over by their desire, Sam realizes she *barely* had a chance to consider that...this is *Carly*. This is her reunion with her first lover, the woman she's longed for since they became separated by an ocean almost two years ago. She'd thought she'd notice more about how *familiar* it would be, to sleep with her old lover again. She'd thought she'd notice more about the differences between Carly and Cat, the variations in the ways Sam has learned to make love over time, what comparisons she can draw between them, what she'd have to relearn about Carly after being so used to Cat's body and needs and desires.

Instead, she barely feels like she thought about anything *at all* except desire.

Maybe this is exactly what they needed, but Sam also feels like there's a lot more she *still* needs from this, as well.

"It's like," Carly is saying, breaking Sam out of her thoughts. "You're *so* different. But also. Not?"

Sam huffs out a laugh. "I mean. I've been with someone else, got used to her. You've been with other people, too."

"It's not a bad thing," Carly replies, turning onto her side more fully now to talk to Sam. "It's just different."

"You're talking about how I wouldn't just let you get your way, aren't you?" Sam teases.

"Yes, and no," Carly smiles. "Even back then, it's not like you just let me do whatever I wanted *all* the time."

"*Definitely* not." But she knows what Carly means. She'd usually let Carly set the pace of their encounters, just like she usually let Carly take the lead on *everything* they did together in daily life. It was part of how Sam expressed her devotion to her best friend.

But with Cat, there's more give and take. Early on, she'd let Cat set the tone a lot as she got used to intimacy with another person, but just as often, now and even then, Sam takes the reins, knowing that Cat needs some guidance, a confident hand. Someone to sweep her off her feet.

Maybe it's just the effect of the full moon, but this time, with Carly, Sam simply *wasn't* content to let her dictate how this encounter would go. Even though Carly had planned it all out, over those text messages. Carly's a planner. Sam loves this about her.

She just loves bucking plans, too.

She moves closer and kisses Carly again, but this time, as intimacy ramps up to a slower, more languorous level of focused passion, she doesn't feel like anyone's plans are being bucked whatsoever.

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"Ooh, fuck, right there," Sam groans, and Carly feels the way Sam's hand grips her hair hard, feels the tug of Sam's grasp ripple across her scalp and down her spine in pleasurable bursts of pain, and emits an eager whimper as her mouth keeps working, tongue keeps moving. Mere moments later, Sam arches up, crying out with pleasure, and Carly holds onto her hip, her breast, like she's trying to keep her grounded, until Sam finally comes down from her orgasm.

Carly lifts herself up, wiping at her chin and her mouth with her hand as she crawls up next to Sam to hold her as she sucks in breaths and continues to groan on her exhales, still clearly basking in the pleasure of the sex they just had. Carly *gets* it. She hadn't expected to be ready for another orgasm so quickly when they began round two, but with Sam's fingers inside of her and kisses down her body that eventually led to Sam going down on her, she came quicker and harder than she expected. And then, it only felt *right* to return the favor (never mind that going down on Sam has been something she's fantasized about for *months*. Or really, something she *never* stopped thinking about in private moments since they broke up).

"You good?" Carly chuckles, when it seems Sam isn't inclined to move.

"Mmhmm," Sam manages, and eventually turns in Carly's arms to face her. "Jeez," she breathes. "Have you gotten *better* at that?"

"I don't know," Carly shakes her head in amusement. "I've practiced *a little* since we broke up," she reveals. Okay, she really hasn't had more than a handful of opportunities to do that, with a couple of women she dated casually in Italy, but she wasn't with either of them long enough for her to feel like her technique would be any different. She still thinks, at the core of it, she knows best how to pleasure *Sam*.

That's been a clarifying part of this last round of sex. They'd taken things slower than the crazed, animalistic sex they had when Sam first came over. Carly had a chance to really explore Sam's body, to find out what has changed about her, find out what's still the same. And mostly? Sam is pretty much the same. Though the ease with which she takes control in bed is new. And welcome. It reminds Carly of the first time they'd had sex, when she'd wanted *so badly* to make the first move and had been just...*petrified*. Sam had taken the lead then, then had stepped back to give Carly almost all the power in their lovemaking.

Carly likes this new side of Sam. It's kind of *hot*. As much as Carly likes being in control, it's exhilarating when someone she trusts as deeply as Sam can convince her to cede a little bit of it. To share it. It feels like they're building something *together*, and that's thrilling.

"What're you thinking about?" Sam asks her. Carly blinks, realizing she's been lost in her thoughts as her fingers trace the pink scratch marks on the skin of Sam's sparsely freckled chest.

"I was just thinking about how being with you is mostly the same in all the best ways. And the ways we're both different...I don't know. It feels *good*." It's not the most eloquent of statements, but her thoughts are complicated, and she's not sure how much she wants to reveal about what, specifically, she's enjoying about Sam.

Sam smiles softly. "It's funny," she says slowly. "I was realizing kinda the same thing. How *familiar* being with you is. But the ways you surprised me, I don't think it's because *you* changed. I think it's because a part of me is used to...Cat."

The way she says it, Carly suspects Sam decided too late that maybe she shouldn't mention Cat. But Carly doesn't mind. She's been thinking about that, too. "Cat's pretty different from me in bed, huh?"

"Well, *yeah*," Sam scoffs, seeming relieved that Carly is willing to engage about the topic. "She's, well, she's kind of...softer. And she likes to let me be in control. And she's not quite so *wild*. Not that she's boring, or anything," Sam adds quickly. "She's sexy and adventurous and *so* passionate, and she likes it when I get rough with her and, um..." She trails off from gushing about her other girlfriend.

"But what happened when you first got here *wouldn't* happen with her," Carly states, amused.

"Not...like that," Sam says quietly.

"Yeah. That was intense. Even for us."

"No regrets, though, right?" Sam asks.

"Definitely not." Carly takes her hand and holds it to her chest.

They're both quiet for a moment. Maybe Sam, like Carly, is thinking back on that moment when they seemed to *crash* together. The memory of it makes Carly shiver a little. How out of control they were. And how *good* it felt to let their instincts take over.

Sam breaks her out of her reverie long moments later. "When you left—"

"Sam," Carly says softly, not wanting to revisit the heartbreak that nearly tore them both apart.

"I was *so angry* when you left," Sam continues doggedly.

"I know, I—"

“Let me finish?” Sam says, and Carly stops talking, mostly because Sam’s tone surprises her. It’s not sharp, or angry, or accusatory. It’s *soft*, almost pleading.

Carly nods at her, just once, to continue.

“I could understand why you left. I could understand why you wanted to be close to your dad, and hell, who wouldn’t want to go to Italy and eat that food and drink that coffee? *I’d* go just for that. But I just couldn’t understand why I had to be the cost. The price you paid for that life.”

Carly fully intends to let Sam talk, but she can’t stay silent here. “I didn’t *want* it to be. I wanted to stay connected to you! I wanted—”

“I know. I remember you wanted long distance.” Sam shakes her head. “Maybe it was my fault, then. I was the one who didn’t think I could handle that kind of thing.”

“If we’d done that, you might never have met Cat,” Carly points out, remembering Sam’s postcard, *knowing*, intellectually, how important Cat is to Sam.

“Yeah.” Sam smiles, soft and affectionate. “I thought about that before. I thought about *thanking* you for breaking my heart, because it brought me to her. And she’s just so *special*.” Carly smiles a little, herself. Talking about Cat isn’t exactly ideal pillow talk, but she also recognizes that this is one of the first really honest conversations she and Sam have been able to have in a long time, so she accepts it. Sam continues, “I just spent so long being angry with you, it made it so hard to accept that I still *loved* you. And maybe I was wrong. Maybe we could have done the long distance thing.”

Carly doesn’t understand why Sam would want to bring this up now, to wonder about choices they didn’t make. So she just says. “I still loved you. The whole time.”

“I think,” Sam says slowly, “maybe I was mad at the wrong person.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Sam continues, “I think that maybe I refused to try long distance with you... because I knew I wouldn’t be worth it. I *knew* you’d meet some hot Italian guy and just forget all about me.”

“But I *didn’t*,” Carly says emphatically. But she can’t help tossing in a little dry humor to lighten the mood. “Okay, I mean, I *definitely* met a hot Italian guy or two, but I *never* forgot about you.”

“I didn’t want to tie you to the past,” Sam whispers. “But I’m the one who refused to try. I’m the one who really broke us up.” She shakes her head. “All this time, I’m the one who broke my own heart, and I wasted all that time being mad at *you*? For going to have the best time of *your life*?” She chuckles darkly. “How selfish *am* I?”

“It *wasn’t* the best time of my life,” Carly states plainly. “Because you weren’t there.” Sam looks at her, that rare vulnerability shining in her dark blue eyes. “When you sent me those



postcards,” Carly began. Sam looks away, and Carly drops her own gaze. “Each one was...it hurt *so* much, but I also treasured each one. They were the only connection I had to you. I wished I was there with you on that journey across the country.”

“You *were* there, at least, it felt that way to me,” Sam replies. “I mean, not like I was hallucinating you or something, but, I was definitely, like, carrying you with me.”

“I missed you *so much*.”

“I know. I missed you, too. I just wish I hadn’t wasted so much time thinking you were my *enemy*.”

“I wish I hadn’t wasted so much time pretending I could forget you.”

They wrap their arms around each other, holding each other close. Carly thinks about how many times she stared at her dark ceiling on nights she couldn’t sleep, thinking up ways to bargain with the universe to *at least* have her best friend back.

She has her best friend back, and more.

They hold each other for a long time. Carly cries, quiet, cathartic tears, and she thinks Sam must be, too, though she’s hiding it very well. But eventually, Sam asks her, “So what *was* Italy really like?”

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Carly pulls away enough to look at Sam, and Sam can see the gleam of residual tears in her eyes before she blinks and swipes them away with a finger. She’s grinning now, slightly. “God, Italy really was *so* cool,” she gushes softly. “Sometimes it still hardly feels real that I was there.”

“I bet,” Sam smiles encouragingly. “How was the food?”

“I should’ve started there,” Carly chuckles. “It was *fantastic*. We kind of ate out a lot?”

“Is that why you’re so good at it now?” Sam quips.

“Oh my *god*.” Carly shoves at her shoulder. “*Not* like that. I meant that *my dad* and I ate at *restaurants* a lot. And I am *not* going to think about my dad—”

“Point taken,” Sam interrupts, “Let’s not go there.”

“*Anyway*.” Carly playfully glares at her. “We didn’t cook a lot at first. But we started to get used to the culture and learned where to get really good, fresh food, then we started trying to cook more. My dad is okay at it, and you know I’m always down to experiment in the kitchen.” She shoots Sam a warning look before she can make some kind of crack about kitchen sex. Which, hmm, maybe they could do that next? But Carly continues, “And even if we weren’t making restaurant quality meals, the food we were buying was so fresh and good that we almost couldn’t go wrong. *Almost*. Assuming we translated everything correctly on some of the packages.”

“That sounds like a story,” Sam smirks.

Carly shrugs. “Not a very exciting one. Sometimes things were just a little off. But literally I ate *really* good food every day, drank *amazing* coffee, and since I was eighteen almost all of the time I was there I also got to try a lot of beer and wine and stuff, too.” Her expression twists slightly. “Some were better than others.”

“Better than what we get here at our parties?” Sam asks.

“Depends,” is all Carly says.

Sam considers all of this, tries to imagine food kind of like the familiar Italian staples she’s eaten all over the US, but *better*. She’s envious. “What else happened?” she asks.

“Well,” Carly says, “There was a school at a US air force base in Italy. It was too far away for me to attend in person, but I attended online to finish high school. It just made more sense than trying to work with time zones to attend a school in the US online. So I didn’t really meet people my own age at school. Luckily, there was plenty of night life for me to enjoy.”

Sam is surprised. “Your dad let you go to bars?”

“Well,” Carly hedges, “it really wasn’t up to him. I was legally an adult, even by US standards, and old enough to drink by Italian standards. He didn’t like it, but he wasn’t in a position to stop me. Especially when his work would take him out of the house for days or weeks sometimes.”

Sam looks away, mouth thinning, thinking about how wanting to actually *spend time with her dad* was a major reason that Carly left, and how unfair it is that even living with him meant there were still times she’d rarely see him, just like her entire childhood. She instead pushes them toward an equally uncomfortable topic. “So who’d you meet in those bars?” she asks, lilting her voice playfully.

Carly grins. “First of all, I went to more nightclubs than bars.”

“Whatever,” Sam waves it off, but then something occurs to her. “Wait, did you go *alone*?”

“Sometimes,” Carly shrugs. “Or I’d find a group of American tourists and kind of blend in with them. And later, once I started meeting some Italians, I’d go with them.”

“And it felt...safe?”

“I can take care of myself,” Carly says easily. She eyes Sam. “*You’re* the one who rode across the *entire country* on your own. And I know you couldn’t have had much money.”

“I can take care of *myself*,” Sam echoes Carly’s statement, then offers another explanation. “And I’d take odd jobs on the road.”

“Right.” Carly looks like she doesn’t quite believe her. Sam can’t really blame her.

“So then,” Sam tries to get them back on the topic she’s been curious about, but also isn’t sure she wants to know. “Who did—”

“Have you been with anyone else besides Cat?” Carly interrupts abruptly.

“No!” Sam answers quickly. It’s a sharp reply, because she’s *surprised*, and she can see Carly’s eyes narrow. Sam shakes her head again. “Seriously, no. When I was traveling, I was never really in the same place very long, and all I was thinking about was you, anyway. Even with Cat, it took some *time* before, uh, anything started with us. Even though we were drawn to each other right away.”

Carly’s eyes drop and she nods. “I just thought...I guess I just wondered if maybe you’d try to *forget*, with other people.”

Sam shakes her head, though now she’s even *more* curious about Carly’s experiences in Italy. “Why? Is that what *you* did?”

It comes out more accusatory than she means it, and she can see that Carly looks a little hurt. “What if I did?” she asks sharply. “Maybe I wasn’t so lucky to find someone new I could fall in love with so quickly.”

“It didn’t happen *quickly*, it—” But Sam cuts herself off, because she knows, in a way, it *did* happen quickly with Cat. It just took longer to admit it. But more than that, she can tell they’re gearing up for a fight, and she doesn’t want that. “I wasn’t *trying* to make you feel bad,” she says, her voice hard because she feels so defensive.

“Well. Thanks. You really nailed it.” Carly brushes at her eyes. *Fuck*, had Sam made her cry?

“I’m sorry,” Sam says plaintively. Tentatively, she reaches for Carly.

Carly moves closer, burrowing into her. “It’s okay. I get it.”

“You get *what*?” Sam asks.

“I get why you wouldn’t want to hear about me fucking around.”

It’s still such a delightful surprise when Carly curses so casually like this. It makes Sam smile. “But I actually *do*,” she says. “Like. I know I might not like everything I hear, but it also doesn’t matter, because it already happened. But I do want to hear about what Italy was like for you. And that means you should be able to talk about the people you met.”

Carly draws away enough to really look at her, eyes hard, gaze searching, until finally she looks away and nods. “I hooked up a few times in Italy,” she reveals.

Sam nods. “I kind of figured that.”

“At first, it was guys,” she explains. “Because it was easier. And I was curious. And I didn’t know where to find other queer people. And, well. Guys were different from you.”

Sam squints. “Are they, really, though?” she asks, pitching her voice low and flexing her arms.

Carly laughs and shoves at her, and it definitely helps break the tension. “You know what I mean. And for the record, I’m glad you’re *not* a guy.”

“Me, too,” Sam agrees. There are definitely parts of being a girl that can be annoying or difficult, but coming to understand herself as a lesbian made being a woman make sense to Sam in a way that had settled a lot of her struggles with gender when she was a child. “So, how was it?” she asks. She’s surprised to realize that, even though Carly’s attraction to guys had been a point of contention when they were figuring things out as high schoolers, she doesn’t feel jealous or threatened just knowing Carly has been with them. She’s *actually* curious what it had been like for her.

Carly bobs her head back and forth. “It was...fine? There were a couple of guys I only hooked up with once, and I didn’t come, so I didn’t want to see them again. But there was this other guy.” She pauses, briefly, meeting Sam’s eye as if checking in on her reaction before she continues. “We saw each other for a little while. It was never serious, but we saw each other for just long enough that I thought we might get there. I don’t even know if he thought we were dating or just hooking up. The first time we slept together, I didn’t get off, but he at least *tried*. So I met up with him again, and we started to find what worked for me, because he really wanted me to enjoy it. We had fun.”

Sam nods. It’s maybe a little more detail than she would’ve wanted, but she’d asked, and as she sits with the knowledge, she again realizes it doesn’t matter. “Good on him. For, you know. Giving a shit.”

“Yeah,” Carly chuckles. “Buuut then I found out he had a girlfriend, so. That was over.”

Sam winces. “Ouch.”

“Yup. But then, not long after that, I started to figure out how to meet queer women over there.”

“Oh, yeah?” Sam asks, inviting her to continue. This she’s a little more interested in.

“Mmhmm. And that was...harder. Because with guys, it kinda didn’t matter as much to me about getting to know them, because I just wanted sex. With women, I kind of *did* want to know them.”

“Why?” Sam asks. “Like, were you trying to date them?”

“No, not really. I mean, I guess I’d have been more open to it, but also, I didn’t feel ready for that. But I did want to be able to talk to someone, *anyone* else, about being queer.”

“Ah,” Sam replies in understanding.

“And because I was still kinda learning Italian, it got confusing sometimes. I ended up hooking up with two different women but both of them thought they were my girlfriend at

different times even though I *thought* I'd been pretty clear that we were just friends." She shakes her head. "It got messy. I kind of had to distance myself from a whole group of women."

"Yikes. Left a trail of broken hearts in Italy, huh?" Sam hopes it lands as humorous, but she can see Carly grimace.

"I guess I'm pretty good at that," she says softly.

Sam takes her hand. "Doesn't matter anymore, anyway. We're here."

"Yeah." Carly wraps an arm around Sam and they hold each other. "Italy was amazing, but it's good to be home."

"Why *did* you come back to the US?" Sam asks.

"A few reasons. One was that my dad was still away a lot. It was great to see him when I *did* see him, but it was harder to miss him when I saw him more than when I never did. The other was that I didn't feel ready to attend school there. And, honestly...I missed you, and Freddie, and Spencer. Even Gibby. I wanted to be home, back with my friends. Even though I knew things would never be the same again, I thought...*hoped*...that maybe I might at least reconnect with you."

"That's why you came to LA?"

"That, and I got into UCLA."

"Right."

"Also, you probably won't believe this, but I missed Groovy Smoothie. And Tubba Chicken."

Sam snorts. "I miss Tubba Chicken every day."

"Sounds about right," Carly replies affectionately.

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While sex with Sam has been the thing she's thought about more than anything for a long time, it also feels *so good* to actually just *talk* with Sam again. To start to fill in some of the gaps, the details they missed in each other's lives until this point. Carly tells Sam about the culture shock of living in Europe—the walkable cities, the Vespas, the train systems. She talks about the handful of trips she took with her dad to experience other parts of the continent: Rome, Venice, Zurich, Munich, Vienna, Bled. He'd wanted to make sure that when he was around to spend time with her, that they did something memorable. She even talks about the little flat she shared with her dad, with its funny looking outlets and tiny kitchen and screenless windows and the balcony where they cultivated a little container garden of herbs underneath their clothesline. She tells Sam about how hot it was in the summer without air conditioning, and how she got used to the sound of the radiator in the winter. She describes she and her father finding places to go during full moons—three-day trips up to the

snow-capped Alps, or to the rolling hills of Tuscany, but admits that too often, she spent the full moon by herself in a too-small apartment, her only choice whether or not to take wolfsbane, something she notes hadn't really changed for her until she met Tori.

She asks Sam all about her journey on the road. Sam claims that the highlights of it are already in the postcards, but acquiesces as Carly presses for more, describing the things she saw, the way the landscapes changed as she drove, the foods she tried, the people she briefly met. She describes spending the handful of full moons she spent on the road in whatever wilderness she could find: forests, prairies, mountains, wherever she could get away from people, and she'd hunt to her heart's content, filling her belly and sating her wolf and sleeping under the stars. Carly asks her about coming to Los Angeles, about how she ended up here, which leads her to asking more about Cat. She *wants* to know how they met, how they fell in love, what it is about Cat that Sam loves so much, both because it's practical, since she has to share Sam with Cat, and because it's important to Sam, and what Sam loves, Carly is prepared to defend, to the best of her ability. As Sam talks about her love for Cat and their life together, Carly is surprised by how little jealousy she feels. Maybe because this has been a known factor for a long time now; she's gotten very used to seeing them together, and she's gone into this new relationship with Sam with her eyes open, understanding and accepting that Cat isn't going anywhere.

A third round of sex, this time a lazier variety, with a lot of kissing and fingering, ends with them holding each other until the sound of Sam's stomach growling prompts them to pull apart.

"I'm *starving*," Sam groans.

"Now that you mention it, I don't think I've ever seen you go so long without eating," Carly teases. She sees the smirk cross Sam's face. "No, eating *me* doesn't count," she preemptively denies.

Sam's face falls. "Spoilsport. But you're right. What do you have to eat around here?"

Carly stands up and stretches, uncoiling all her limbs after being tangled up in Sam for... however long they'd just spent in bed. "You know, when I planned this, I'd wanted to order some dinner a long time ago." Sam groans, clearly struggling just to hear the word *dinner*. "Tell you what, I'll order something right now. There's a Greek place near here that delivers fast."

"Sure, whatever, just order me something meaty. What do you have to snack on?"

Carly recognizes that Sam is on her way to becoming too hungry to function. With a sinking feeling, she opens her cabinet. She *needs* to go grocery shopping; the full moon over the weekend—not to mention spring break and every other recent disruption of her everyday life—upset her regular shopping schedule and she's been mostly living off of the boxed macaroni and cheese, instant oatmeal and peanut butter she bought just to have on hand.

She guesses that if she's going to date Sam again, she needs to do a better job of anticipating her needs. But even back when they dated the first time, Spencer was the one who tended to keep the fridge stocked, with enough to feed any of Carly's friends who might come by.

But, in the cabinet where she keeps her teas and coffees, she finds half a bag of marshmallows, from over the winter when it got chilly enough for her to want to make hot chocolate a couple of times. They might be kind of stale by now, but she doubts Sam will mind. “I have marshmallows,” she reports eagerly.

Sam merely grunts and takes them from Carly, who spends the next minute or so standing nude in front of her window, gazing out at the sun at the edge of the horizon through the narrow slats of her blinds as she calls to order delivery from the nearby Greek restaurant.

By the time she hangs up, Sam has eaten the entire rest of the bag. Carly hopes it’s enough to tide her over. “They said about twenty-five minutes.” Sam frowns at this, so Carly continues quickly. “I’ll need to get dressed to go downstairs and get the food, and I need a quick shower.” Sam sighs and slumps down onto the bed. Carly chuckles, “I’ll only be gone for a few minutes.”

“No, it’s not that,” Sam mumbles. “I just know I should take a shower, too, before I go home, but I don’t want to, because it’ll be my *third shower* today.”

Sam might be focused on the detail of taking a third shower, but that’s not what caught Carly’s attention. “Wait, what?”

“Well, I know she can’t smell as well as we do, but I still think Cat would notice if I came home smelling like *sex*,” Sam answers. She smirks. “Your scent is *all over* me.”

But Carly can’t focus on the sexiness of *that* detail. “Sorry, I, uh. I guess I didn’t realize you were going back to your apartment tonight.”

“Oh.” Sam presses her mouth together. They’re both quiet for a long moment as they watch each other, Carly standing nude across the room, Sam flopped on Carly’s bed, half propped up on her pillows. “Sorry,” Sam finally says.

“I really thought you’d spend the night,” Carly says faintly, unable to express why this *hurts* so much.

“I, uh, hadn’t planned on it,” Sam replies. “Since we both have school tomorrow, and Cat and I ride in together. It doesn’t make sense for me to wake up and drive back to my apartment and get ready there.”

“I get it,” Carly says quietly.

“I *want* to,” Sam adds. “Just, not tonight.”

“Okay,” Carly smiles faintly. “Next time?”

“Next time.” Sam swings her legs over the side of the bed. “Mind if I join you in that shower?” she smirks.

“You just want me to wash you so you don’t have to.”

“It’s *so* much work!” Sam whines as she follows Carly into her bathroom.

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The shower is relaxing, and once Sam is in there it's hard to want to get out. Luckily, Carly keeps them on task, soaping up Sam's body for her and maneuvering so that they take turns under the spray. She breathes in the scent of the steamy air. Carly's soap smells like mint and lavender, a satisfying combination that Sam definitely recognizes as a scent that clings to Carly's skin, that has become part of what Sam recognizes about her.

She likes that she'll be able to smell this soap on her own skin for the rest of the night, a subtle reminder of Carly.

When Carly is ready to get out, Sam follows eagerly, because they're that much closer to dinner time. In fact, just as Carly finishes getting dressed, she gets a notification that the food is on its way. "I'll wait downstairs," she tells Sam. She pauses, kisses Sam, and heads out of the apartment.

Sam finishes dressing and then, she's alone in Carly's apartment, at least for the moment. She looks around curiously. It's small, of course. She wanders into the little kitchenette, opening cupboards at random, noting the small number of plain dishes, the smattering of basic cookware, the bare pantry. Maybe it's the lack of food, but Carly's kitchen makes her feel *sad*. She ventures out to the rest of the apartment, taking in, again, the standard sofa (which, now that she thinks about it, still smells a bit like Freddie), the wooden folding table and the single chair that sits in front of it, the shelf with the TV on it. Sam peruses the contents of the shelf: a small collection of books, DVDs and CDs, ones she recognizes as some of Carly's favorites, some she doesn't recognize at all.

Aside from the purple bedspread, the contents of that shelf are only things in the apartment that look like Carly picked them out at all. Everything else looks like it was furnished by someone who didn't have to live there.

Maybe Carly got this apartment furnished. Sam has heard that that's a thing. She wonders if furnished apartments come with dishes and things, too. That could explain why this space feels like it lacks Carly's personality.

Sam gazes at Carly's walls, wondering why they're so bare. Maybe Carly isn't allowed to hang anything? Sam would go insane. She knows that what she and Cat did to their apartment is probably not strictly *allowed*, but hey, she's not the one who paid a security deposit to live there. And she's pretty sure Nona can afford it.

She just can't shake the sad feeling this apartment gives her. It might be different if there were something *charming* about its shortcomings, but it's just...*bland*. And it makes no sense, because Carly is one of the most interesting people she knows.

Carly comes back up a moment later, grinning triumphantly with a bag of food in her hand. "Dinner!" she announces excitedly.

"Thank god." Sam rubs her stomach.



The two of them sit side by side on the couch, eating gyros right out of the takeout boxes. Sam doesn't talk much as she works through her first meal, but Carly had been smart and ordered two for her, and she begins to slow down as she eats her second one, which means she can actually talk.

"Hey, do you rent your apartment furnished?"

Carly looks a little surprised at the question. "Nope. Why?"

"Oh. Just curious," Sam answers, feeling more puzzled about the state of the space she's in.

"My dad paid for everything, and I was kinda trying to stay within a budget. Especially considering half of this stuff I had to get delivered since it definitely wasn't going to fit in my car."

"Ahh. Gotcha." Sam can understand getting cheap furniture because you can't afford better. It was how her mom furnished their apartments growing up.

Carly shrugs. "It serves a purpose. That was about all I was worried about."

"It's, uh," Sam tries to figure out how to express what she thinks about the decor. "Some of it just doesn't seem very you," she tries.

Carly's expression seems to close off, mildly. "In some ways, the me who moved here isn't the same as I am now," is all she offers as an explanation.

Sam guesses that makes sense. She tries to imagine Carly, moving to a city all on her own, without her father or her brother there as a support system. To the same city Sam is living in, but with no expectation of ever seeing her again. Maybe she'd want to reinvent herself. But maybe she wouldn't know where to begin. Sam had kind of reinvented herself for a time. She knows she changed, becoming someone who wandered the country on a motorcycle, then someone who babysat *kids* for a living, of all unlikely scenarios. Losing Carly changed Sam. Then Cat changed Sam. Italy must've changed Carly. And maybe she had been prepared to change again to start this new chapter of her life.

Still, it makes Sam a little sad to realize that the girl with the colorful, eclectic bedroom in high school, the girl who made a youthful career on the silly and irreverent and bizarre, thought she wanted to turn into...*this*.

After dinner, they trade lazy kisses on the couch for a little bit before Sam finally says, "All right. I guess I should go."

"I'll walk you downstairs," Carly says, standing up to grab her shoes.

At the apartment door, they share one more kiss, and then Sam follows Carly quietly down the courtyard stairs. At the door to the apartment complex, Sam turns to look at Carly. She *wants* to kiss her again, but there's still an instinct to be discreet, at least in public.

"When will I see you again?" Carly asks.

There's a pang in Sam's chest as she realizes that, unlike her connection with Cat, there's no guarantee she'll see Carly every day. "Uh. I'm not sure. Not long."

Carly nods sadly. "Okay," she says. "I'll talk to you tomorrow?"

"Of course," Sam answers. She squeezes Carly's hand and walks to her bike, still parked at the curb, wedged between two cars. She puts on her helmet and straddles her bike. "Night, Carls," she says, and turns on her motorcycle.

In her rearview mirror, she catches a glimpse of Carly, just standing in the doorway, as Sam drives away.

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It's after dinner, the sun has been set for a while, and Cat isn't sure what to do with herself.

She finished her homework a long time ago, even started to work ahead a little before she lost the ability to concentrate on it. It was about then that she realized she was hungry, and made herself some dinner. She made enough for Sam, too, because she's still not sure when to expect her home.

She hadn't really realized how much of her evenings are about *Sam*. How much of her life, really.

Because without Sam here, Cat has no idea what to do with herself. What did she used to do for fun, before she and Sam would watch TV together and cuddle and kiss?

Of course, Cat knows she is her own person, even without Sam. There are plenty of things she does by herself, even when Sam is around. She'll write music, or draw outfits, or sometimes fall into internet rabbit holes where she wants to read every detail and fact about a certain animal or actress or something. Sometimes, she'll do these things while Sam is watching TV on the couch across the room, or painting. It's not like they're *codependent*. It's not like Cat doesn't know how to be alone.

She's just not used to it. She's rarely been alone at her apartment, well, since she moved here. She always had Nona around before Sam moved in, and then Sam would always be around, except for the nights she'd disappear on the full moon, before she felt safe telling Cat where she was really going and what was actually going on with her.

Maybe that's part of it. It reminds Cat of how it felt to be cut off from Sam, to believe that she was keeping a secret from Cat, to think that Sam got sick of her, to fear that Sam might not come back.

Cat flips through channels on the TV, but eventually groans and flings the remote down. It all seems so *boring* with Sam's constant running commentary.

Cat stares at the blank TV screen for a long moment. Should she just go to bed? It's too early for that, but what else is there?

Finally, she decides to put on *Lady and the Tramp*, because it's one of her favorite movies, and it always makes her feel better.

But not long after the movie starts, she hears the familiar sound of Sam's motorcycle, and the roar of the engine cuts out as Sam parks on the patio.

Cat stands up, curious and excited, and watches as Sam comes in through the patio door. "You're back!" she exclaims.

Sam grins at her, a relaxed and easy expression. "Of course I am," she replies.

Cat can't help it; she rushes over and flings herself at Sam, pressing her face against the leather of her jacket, the curls of her blonde hair. "I missed you," she murmurs. Sam smells *clean*, but it's a different sort of clean than how she usually smells. Cat doesn't know how to feel about it.

Sam chuckles and holds her back. "I missed you, too, babe," she replies, though to Cat, it sounds rote, like Sam is politely responding in kind.

*Of course she didn't miss me*, a part of Cat's mind says. *She had plenty to think about that isn't me.*

Sam pulls away, hands on Cat's shoulders as she smiles at her. "What're you doing?"

"Watching a movie," Cat replies, though she reaches over the back of the couch to shut it off. "But we can do something else."

"I'm pretty beat," Sam admits, running a hand through her hair. "I think I'll get ready for bed, but we can watch TV for a while if you want? I think there's supposed to be a new *Slightly Less Gorgeous* on."

Cat perks up. "Let's watch it!"

For the sake of simplicity, they both get ready for bed together in the bedroom. Sam strips off her shirt, and Cat inhales sharply when she sees the skin of her torso. "What?" Sam asks, then looks down. "Oh," she murmurs.

Cat isn't sure what to say as she looks at the overlapping scratches and bruises all over Sam's neck and chest and, she sees when Sam turns to grab her pajama shirt, her back. She feels herself grow hot at the implication of it, and her stomach coils with a mix of jealousy and anger and disgust and arousal. Just *what* did Sam and Carly do together? Well, she *knows* what they did together, *obviously*, but...how did...is this something Sam can't get from Cat that she *needs*? Could Cat do this to her to this extent? Would she ever want to?

"Sorry," is all Sam offers as she tugs her shirt over her head.

"It's okay," Cat says faintly.

Once they're in their pajamas, they cuddle up on the couch together. Sam flips to the right channel, slips her arm around Cat, and they start watching their show together.

All should be well.

But before long, Sam starts snoring.

Cat can't help but feel like, at least tonight, Carly got the best of Sam, and she got the leftovers.

Though, speaking of leftovers, when Sam wakes up just before the show ends, she pokes around in the fridge, and is *delighted* to discover the leftover pasta that Cat had made for dinner earlier. She eats it cold, right out of the tupperware. Cat smiles. At least there's *something* she can offer Sam tonight.

They go to bed soon after that—Cat has to prompt a sleepy Sam to go brush her teeth again after eating that pasta—and then they curl up together.

All in all, Cat supposes she survived the first night of Sam sleeping with Carly, with Cat's knowledge and permission. She's *happy*, she came home to Cat without complaint, she's as loving and affectionate as always, despite being sleepy—though, even her sleepiness isn't that uncommon just after the full moon.

But Cat feels like she's choking back tears as she lies in bed next to her lover, staring at the hickey just beneath Sam's ear that *she* didn't put there, thinking about the way Sam looked, thinking about the way it felt to be alone all evening, knowing what her girlfriend was up to, *knowing* she isn't enough.

She never thought that the person who promised to always choose her could ever make her feel that way.

Cat doesn't sleep all that well, and in the morning, she feels quiet and distant. She can't tell if Sam even notices, because Sam is unusually cheerful. It makes Cat want to at least *try* to have a good day, and she puts on a smile as they head to school together.

They part ways once they get on campus, and Sam kisses her, lingering a little longer with the kiss than she usually does in public.

"I love you," she tells Cat, wearing a cocky sort of grin. But Cat can't help that her eye is drawn to a prominent hickey on Sam's neck, instead of onto every feature of her face that she finds so irresistibly attractive.

"I love you, too," Cat replies, but this time, though she knows it's a true sentiment, she feels like *she's* the one whose response is automatic. Like there's a block in her heart and it can't quite reach the words that come out of her mouth.

Sam doesn't seem to notice though, and she actually *winks* at Cat before striding away, her posture making her look pleased and proud. A marked difference from the slouchy, unhurried way she usually walks on campus, because despite always saying she enjoys her art classes once she gets there, she never actually wants to go.

Cat shuffles off to her own class, trying not to dwell on how lost and confused she feels.

After they're both finished on campus for the day, they drive home together. Sam talks idly about her art classes and asks Cat about her day, but Cat finds she doesn't have a lot to say, and the silence between them stretches.

"Sorry," Cat finally says. "I'm just thinking about all the homework I have," she lies.

"Yeah, me, too," Sam agrees. "I still have to catch up a little from yesterday."

Even if Cat wants to reply, she can't. She stares out the window as Sam drives them home, listening to the incongruously upbeat pop music on the radio, turned down low, and Sam's fingers drumming and tapping against the steering wheel.

Once at home, Cat stations herself at the dining nook with all her school books while Sam sets up her easel across the living room. She seems to be working on something for a little while, but then Cat notices that she's just sitting in one of the living room armchairs, grinning and tapping away at her phone.

Cat looks back at her homework, feeling her stomach churn and her chest ache.

But a few minutes later, Sam speaks. "Hey, babe?"

"What?"

"Do we have any plans this weekend?"

Cat turns to look at her, narrowing her eyes thoughtfully. "We're babysitting Saturday afternoon. I don't think we planned anything else."

"Ah. Okay. So nothing at night?"

"I don't think so." Cat repeats, a little testy. "Why?"

"Just 'cause, I was trying to make plans, and I was trying to see if there might be a night where I could stay over..." she hesitates. "You know," she offers awkwardly.

Cat hates that this is so hard to talk about. She hates the idea of Sam being gone *all* night. But most of all, she hates that she even hates this so much, when she pushed so hard to make it happen.

She doesn't even answer Sam. She just bursts into tears.

And now she hates that she's crying over this.

"Whoa, hey, Cat, babe," Sam utters and quickly—almost *too* quickly—she's kneeling next to Cat by the dining nook, trying to coax Cat to get up, maybe to hug her.

Cat pulls away and stays seated, but Sam stays there, hand on her arm comfortingly. Cat pulls herself together enough to manage to speak. "You're so *happy* and I'm *miserable*!" she cries.

The pronouncement is followed by silence, save for Cat's sniffles and whimpers as she attempts to calm down. Finally, Sam says. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"*Really?*" Cat challenges her. "You had *no idea* that I felt so *terrible*?"

Sam looks away. "I knew this was hard for you. I thought you were getting used to it. I really thought we were on the same page."

"I'm *trying*, I really am," Cat sobs. "But you have this brand spanking shiny new girlfriend who is *so hot*, and I'm just the boring girlfriend you leave behind at home. Don't you know how painful that is?"

"You're *not* boring," Sam says fiercely. "You couldn't be boring if you *tried*."

"Well I don't *feel* very exciting when I might as well just be your *roommate*."

Sam sighs and rubs at her face. She gently pulls at Cat's arm again. "Come sit on the couch with me," she requests.

"I don't want to," Cat replies stubbornly.

"Well, I don't want to keep kneeling here like this," Sam shoots back, gesturing to herself.

"There's a seat right over there," Cat informs her, pointing to the other side of the dining nook.

Sam stares at her, and doesn't break eye contact as she stands up and slides into place across from Cat. "I hate that you feel like this," she says softly. Her blue eyes, which almost always look so *tough*, right now have a wounded puppy dog quality to them that Cat has rarely seen.

It almost makes her more frustrated. "Well, I do," Cat says sharply. She doesn't know what else to say.

"What can I do to make you feel better?" Sam implores, still looking right at Cat even if Cat can't always meet her eye. When Cat just shrugs sullenly, Sam continues, "Do you want me to stop..." It's like she can't even bring herself to finish the thought.

But Cat shakes her head emphatically. "No. That wouldn't be fair to you."

"Well, this obviously isn't fair to *you*," Sam gestures toward Cat, "if it's making you feel so bad." She looks suddenly tired and pained as she watches Cat. "What can I do?" she repeats.

Cat doesn't know how to explain that she wants to feel *wanted*. She thinks about what she feels like she can actually ask for and remembers what set her off to begin with. "I don't want you to stay over at Carly's," she blurts.

Sam blinks, and her shoulders droop a little. Cat can tell she's disappointed and she braces herself for pushback, but Sam nods slowly. "Okay. I get that."

“And,” Cat adds, her eyes falling to the hickey on Sam’s neck. “I don’t want to see... *evidence*.”

“Evidence?” Sam asks, but then she seems to realize where Cat is looking and raises her fingers to her neck. “Oh.” She nods again. “Okay. So you want me to be discreet?” Cat nods. “*How* discreet?” Sam asks.

Cat frowns. “I just don’t need to *see* what you got up to,” she explains.

“I guess I mean...” Sam runs a hand through her hair. “What’s hard for me is not knowing whether I can even *mention*...Carly.”

“Of course you can mention her,” Cat answers. She shrugs. “It’s weirder when you *don’t*. I know you text her. I know you talk to her. I know you *want* her and I know you *do it* with her. You don’t have to pretend you’re not texting her, I just don’t want you to rub my nose in it. So like, if we’re doing something together where you wouldn’t normally be on your phone, don’t be texting her the whole time. You know? But it’s mostly the...*hickies* that bother me. I don’t want to see her all over your body.”

“I can do that,” Sam says in a subdued voice. She watches expectantly, like she’s sure Cat has more, but she doesn’t want to invite more limitations on her relationship with Carly.

But Cat can’t really think of another limitation that seems fair to ask for. So she just says. “I also just want to feel like you’re still excited to be with me.”

“Of *course* I am,” Sam cuts in quickly.

“You *say* it, but I don’t *feel* it.”

“Cat, I spend every day with you, happily. I *love* being around you, basically all the time. You’re the person I share a *home* with. What we have is *special*.”

“It might be special, but it *feels*...*normal*.” Cat realizes what it is that is bothering her.

“Maybe what I need is for you and I to do more things together that *aren’t* just being at home together like we are all the time.”

“Like,” Sam narrows her eyes. “Like you want me to take you on dates?” she suggests.

“Yeah! Something like that. Or even if we just go for a walk on the beach together. Or go to the movies. Just something...different.”

“Those sound like dates,” Sam points out.

“Then yeah. We need to go on more dates.”

“Like, every time I do something with Carly? Tit for tat?”

Cat giggles at the word ‘tit’, though she can’t quite bring herself to repeat it. She realizes that talking about this and being honest about how she was feeling is starting to make her feel a

little better. “It doesn’t have to be that even. Just once a week or so let’s do something special together. That way I still feel like I’m special to you.”

“You are,” Sam says, genuinely, as she reaches for Cat’s hand and kisses her knuckles.

“Then make me feel like you want to be with me, too, and that I’m not just your second choice when you’re actually thinking about somebody else,” Cat says firmly and clearly.

Sam looks a little shocked at the pronouncement, like she’s going to protest the characterization, but she drops her eyes. “I get why it would feel that way. Even though it’s not true. But it’s just...so *exciting* to reconnect with Carly like this.”

“I know,” Cat says wistfully. “Believe me, I know.”

They sit quietly for a moment, Sam looking guilty, Cat gazing back at her, almost daring Sam to try to offer some kind of apology or platitude because Sam has exactly what Cat wants. But she doesn’t. All she says is, “I’ll do better. And I’ll talk to Carly.”

“Good,” Cat says. She feels lighter, and without everything hanging over her, she realizes that it’s almost dinnertime. “Are you hungry? I’m hungry.”

“I’m *starving*,” Sam answers emphatically.

Cat laughs. “Let’s have chicken. Do you want chicken?”

Sam gazes at her fondly. “I really do love you so much, you know that?”

“You just love chicken,” Cat refutes, but it’s playful now. She has no doubt Sam loves her deeply. Not that it was ever really in question, but knowing Sam will listen to her even when she’s upset really helps it to sink in.



## The Edge ~Time

Carly is eager to inform Tori the next day that things with Sam went really, *really* well, and *definitely* weren't awkward, and were *definitely* satisfying, and basically, Carly thinks the fruition of this desire, the expression of this *love* between herself and Sam, feels like it settles something crucial within her (though that part, Carly doesn't enumerate for Tori).

Tori comments that Carly seems noticeably happier, she lightly teases about the power of sex as a cure-all and expresses how happy she is for Carly, though Carly can tell that this is about the extent of Tori's ability to engage on the topic. She's still clearly wrestling a little with Cat's role in all this.

And to be honest, now that Carly is finished with her classes and back at her apartment, alone, with it feeling like any other afternoon, she is, too.

The thing that doesn't sit well with her is the idea that she doesn't know when she's going to see Sam again, and the fact that Sam didn't stay over. It had just been so *weird* to have to say goodbye to Sam when they were still both kind of floating through the post-intimacy bliss they were sharing in the wake of some truly incredible sex, in which they'd been sexually reacquainted, remembering how they fit together and discovering some new ways they could. She's never had to say goodbye to her after sex like that before. There'd never been any reason in the past that Sam *couldn't* spend all night with Carly in her bed.

She and Sam have texted sporadically today, mostly still glowing about the night before and expressing how much they can't wait to do it again, but now that they're both home, the texting is picking up. Carly dares to ask the question.

**When will I see you again?**

She bites her lip as she waits for the answer. She's not used to feeling like someone who has to *chase* her partner like this, who has to send texts that sound like cliches sent by insecure girls after one-night stands with guys who ghost them, or send them sympathetic white lies about not being ready for relationships. For better or worse, Carly is used to being pursued—by Freddie, even by Sam early on, when her devotion to their best friendship had been her own quiet pursuit, albeit one Carly had been ignorant of. Even in Italy, the people she'd gotten together with had come on to her. Though that had also been partially a language issue and Carly had certainly been looking for connection. But the handful of times Carly has made the first move, it's been...awkward.

And the uncertainty in Sam's answer doesn't make her feel any better.

**This weekend sometime?**

**Lemme see when I might be free**

Okay, she knows they're students, it's the middle of the semester, when things start to get a little more hectic, but Carly kind of thought the point of all this was to see each other a *little* more often than once, maybe twice a week. After all, Sam spends every day with Cat.

**Maybe think about tomorrow too?**

**I could make some time**

And then...nothing.

Right as things in their texting were starting to get good, Sam just...disappears. And Carly spends far too long staring at her phone, waiting to see some ellipses or something to indicate that Sam is replying.

Finally, she sighs, and tosses her phone aside, and refocuses on homework. She's certain it isn't personal, she knows Sam would never just *ignore* her. Even when they'd tried to ignore each other, when they were still figuring out how to be a part of each other's world again, it hadn't really worked.

But she also knows that if Sam is hurt, she'll run away. And while she can't imagine *how* her question might have hurt Sam...she's starting to wonder if maybe she's pushing too hard, or asking too much, or somehow frustrating Sam enough that she has to just...*disappear* for a while.

Carly resists the urge to text her more, figuring that the more likely explanation is that Sam got hungry or distracted and left her phone somewhere. It doesn't seem *extremely* likely, because their conversation had been flowing naturally. But Sam doesn't always behave in ways that make total sense, so Carly chalks it up to Sam's general *Samness* and tries not to think about it.

Over an hour passes before Carly's phone starts ringing. It's Sam.

"Hey," she answers when she picks up, a little guardedly.

"Hey," Sam replies. She sounds...maybe a little tired? "Uh, sorry I bailed earlier."

"Is that what happened?" Carly asks, honestly a little confused.

Sam seems to pick up something in her tone, because she asks, "Are you mad at me?"

“What? No. But I *was* confused.”

“Good. Okay. I mean, not good that you were confused, but...” Sam trails off. “Anyway, sorry. Something with Cat came up.”

Ah. “Right,” Carly replies, trying not to sound jealous, but it’s hard when she feels like she doesn’t get the time with Sam that she wants, when Cat gets her *all the time*.

They’re both quiet for a moment, and Carly wonders if Sam is going to try to dissect Carly’s tone, but instead Sam says, “Anyway, I saw what you sent, and I can come over tomorrow after we get back from campus.”

“Oh! Okay. That sounds great!” Carly enthuses. Still, it’s a little weird that the call feels so *businesslike*. While she tries to figure out what else to say, she hears a sound in the background of the call that she can’t quite place. “Where are you?” she asks.

“Out on the patio.”

“You’re outside?” This seems oddly like...a boundary placed on their call. Like nothing can escalate, no phone sex or anything like that. Not that Carly is necessarily *looking* for that right now, but you know. She’d be open to it.

“Yeah. Seemed easiest to be honest.”

Carly doesn’t know what exactly *that* means, but she accepts it. “Well, I’m really glad I’m going to see you tomorrow. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too.” Sam’s voice is low, soft, *warm*, and makes Carly close her eyes, just to let it sink into her bones. “*God*, I can’t wait to touch you again.”

Carly inhales slowly. “Me, too,” she murmurs. “I miss your lips. Your hands. Your mouth.”

Sam chuckles, “You already said that.”

“Your mouth is more than just your lips,” Carly shoots back.

“Okay, true,” Sam acquiesces.

They fall quiet again. It’s *weird*, Carly thinks, this contrast between the night before, one of the softest and most intimate memories Carly thinks she has experienced, especially considering the way they’d talked to each other, the vulnerability they’d both expressed, and *now*, where it feels almost as though they’re trying to get away with talking while someone is listening on the line.

With an odd sinking feeling, Carly wonders if someone *is*. But Cat wouldn’t want to do that. Would she?

She’s about to ask, to check if Sam is actually truly alone, but Sam speaks first.

“Listen, I’d better go,” she says, tone a little brisk. “If I’m coming over tomorrow I have to make sure I do all my homework and stuff for Friday tonight, too.”

Yeah. It’s a good point. “Guess I’m in the same boat,” Carly agrees.

“But I’m going to see you tomorrow,” Sam says, in a smoother voice, one full of promise. “And I can’t fucking *wait*.”

Yeah, okay. That’s something Carly can hold onto for the rest of the night.

The next day feels similar to Tuesday, the sense of urgency building as the hours of the day drag on, and Carly’s focus tends to drift inevitably to Sam’s impending visit to her apartment. She reflects, on her walk home, that maybe there is something to the idea of not seeing each other every day. It gives excitement a chance to build.

Though when it comes down to it, Carly thinks as she showers, she’d rather have Sam every day than have to wait and let excitement build. For all the years they spent together, basically every single day, it’s not like she ever got tired of Sam, or, when they started having sex, desired her any less for their close proximity. Well, okay, that isn’t entirely true. Sam can be frustrating and annoying. It’s often endearing, but sometimes she crosses a line, like the time she left food all over Carly’s bed and panties on the stairs.

But, you know. For the most part, especially once they’d really settled all the romantic and sexual tension between them, Carly couldn’t get enough of Sam. And it’s certainly true again now.

Carly has a chance to prepare for dinner a little better, and calls to have pizza delivered about an hour after she expects Sam to arrive. She still hasn’t gone grocery shopping. Maybe tomorrow. She starts considering what kinds of snacks she should buy to keep on-hand for Sam, hopefully ones she herself won’t mindlessly devour while studying. That would kind of defeat the purpose of buying them.

Before long, though, Sam indicates that she’s leaving her apartment, and Carly goes downstairs to wait for her at the entrance to her apartment complex. Like before, she ends up standing down there for about fifteen minutes in her haste to meet Sam, awkwardly nodding at people who glance at her on their way in or out of the building, until she hears the sound of Sam’s motorcycle making its way down her street, and steps through the front door in time to see Sam park, take off her helmet, and meet her eyes.

“Hi,” she greets her. There’s something about Sam and her motorcycle that manages to take her breath away. She just looks so *confident* and *effortless*. It’s *sexy*. Which maybe shouldn’t be at all surprising, considering the cultural significance of motorcycles. But it suits Sam, in a way Carly wouldn’t have anticipated when they were younger.

“Hey,” Sam responds in kind, dismounting her bike and heading to meet Carly at the door. She follows Carly through the courtyard and up the stairs to her apartment, and, like before, Carly immediately begins to kiss her as soon as they’re inside.

Sam kisses back, warm hands wrapping around Carly's back. Carly inhales the intoxicating scent of leather and woodsmoke and hazy asphalt and smog in Sam's hair and on her skin, a comforting mix of familiarity and something different, symbolic, like freedom and opportunity. Even with different layers of scent surrounding her, Sam is still her favorite scent in the world.

She nuzzles her neck, pulling back to look down at her, wanting to see those stunning blue eyes hazy with desire, and as she does so, she catches a glimpse of a prominent purple bruise on Sam's neck. "Oh," she breathes in satisfaction, brushing her fingers over the spot. It's no surprise; she'd done her best to cover up the worst of them on her own neck, mostly so that Andre wouldn't ask too many questions when they saw each other in class.

"Oh. Yeah," Sam answers, her grin flashing to a wince for a moment. "Yeah, that's something. Um. No more marks."

"No more marks?" Carly asks, repeating it just so she can process it.

"Yeah. You know. Trying not to wave around a lot of...evidence."

Carly understands what she's alluding to. She doesn't like it, but then, she tries to imagine how she'd feel if Sam came over covered in hickeys *she* didn't give her. She could understand why that would suck. But the biting and scratching comes so *naturally* to them close to the full moon, Carly wonders if they'll really be able to resist. "Guess we'll have to do our best to hold back," she voices her concern.

"Guess so," Sam grunts, tugging Carly closer to her to kiss her again.

But Sam's request causes Carly to consider something, and a few seconds later, she pulls away again. "For me," she breathes, "You can mark me as much as you want." She can see the way Sam's eyes scorch in response, and she adds, "*Below* the neck." Because, now that Sam has brought it up, Carly would rather not have to cover hickeys constantly. It *is* annoying.

"I can do that," Sam murmurs, and they're kissing again.

Carly wonders if this time, she might be able to take Sam against the door, but it doesn't turn out that way. They begin instinctively crossing the room toward the bed, shedding clothes along the way, kisses vacillating from hard and frantic to soft, loving, meaningful kisses when the two of them take a moment to appreciate both the unlikeliness and the joy of their reconnection.

Eventually, Carly ends up lying stretched out alongside a nude Sam on the bed, taking her time running her hands all over her torso, trying to remember to be more gentle, to not use nails. It's a little easier now that the moon has waned more; they're not as wild under its power as they had been even two days ago. When Carly decides to start touching Sam between her legs, letting her lips take over the territory her hands had been exploring, she has Sam's voice and Sam's moans in her ears to let her guide her. After a few hisses and warnings to be careful, Carly remembers to ease up on the way she sucks and nibbles at Sam's skin, letting her tongue do most of the work, focusing on her nipples. Carly does her

best to tease her for a little while, just for fun, before Sam tugs at her hair in a way that tells her she's losing her patience, and Carly's groan turns into a laugh against Sam's collarbone before she adjusts the pace of her touches, and is surprised by how quickly Sam comes.

"Wow," she murmurs, feeling satisfied and smug as Sam slowly stops shaking. "I'll never get tired of watching that," she comments, still drinking in Sam's flushed cheeks and bleary gaze.

"God," Sam groans.

"And I'll never get tired of making you temporarily religious with the power of my fingers," she snarks.

Sam laughs. "Cocky," she manages.

Carly wiggles her eyebrows, "Maybe one day."

"Weirdo," Sam counters. It's weak, and maybe she knows it, because she immediately follows by flipping Carly onto her back and climbing on top of her. She smirks down at her.

Carly melts, already absolutely ready to be at Sam's mercy.

Sam clearly has less patience than Carly has, because it doesn't take long before her fingers are inside of Carly, her mouth is leaving red marks all along Carly's chest, and Carly is holding onto her headboard just to feel *grounded* on something as Sam brings her higher and higher, until she crashes, barely aware of Sam's grunts of pleasure as Carly arches up into her. Sam brings her down slowly, fingers still buried inside of her, but still, kisses on her breasts gentle, and when Carly opens her eyes, Sam is looking right at her, eyes full of affectionate warmth.

"You're so..." But Carly can't even find the words as she gazes at her lover, the only woman she's ever truly loved. She doesn't even think she knows *how* to love anyone else. Wildly, as she attempts to come back to reality, she thinks that maybe she was only built to love Sam.

"You're welcome," Sam grins, pressing a final kiss to Carly's sternum and rolling off of her, settling beside her, fingertips idly tapping at each little bruise on Carly's torso as she surveys her handiwork (or...mouthiwork?) with a satisfied expression.

Carly closes her eyes and enjoys the sensation of Sam's gentle fingers all over her as she slowly begins to feel like she can move again. When she's ready, she turns to roll toward Sam, who automatically loops an arm around her waist to hold her there. "Hey," she greets.

"Hey," Sam replies in kind. Carly loves how *relaxed* Sam looks right now. For as long as she's known Sam, she's always been someone *ferocious*, someone easily riled. It's rare, the moments when the storms in her eyes become placid waters, and Carly loves how often she gets to be the cause of it.

"I love you," she sighs.

Sam leans in and kisses her, then rests their foreheads together. "I love you, too."

They're both quiet, basking in each other, sharing kisses and holding each other. Carly tells her, "I'm really glad you were able to come over today."

"Me, too," Sam answers, holding her closer.

Even though this visit with Sam isn't even over yet, Carly can't help but already begin to think about the next time they might have this. They'd talked about the weekend, even the possibility of Sam staying over, since she didn't seem to think it would make sense to do so on a school night. "I can't wait to be able to hold you all night," she murmurs.

Sam is quiet for a long moment. "Me, too," she finally answers wistfully.

"Did you ever figure out your weekend plans?" Carly asks, eyes closed as she nestles close to Sam.

Sam stirs slightly. "Yeah. We've...got to talk about that."

Carly doesn't like the sound of that. "Uh oh."

"It's not that bad," Sam protests quickly.

That isn't exactly comforting. Carly draws back to look at Sam, already feeling a little defensive. Sam looks like she doesn't quite want to look her in the eye. "What now?" Carly sighs.

Sam's mouth twists in frustration, but then she smooths over her expression and speaks, "Cat is still having a lot of trouble with this."

"Shocking," Carly mutters darkly, though she feels a pang of guilt as soon as she says it.

Sam winces like Carly's word is a strike. Carly can see her features harden and she continues on as if Carly hadn't spoken. "She asked for two accommodations. One we already talked about. No marks."

For some reason, what had seemed reasonable to Carly thirty minutes ago is now something that chafes. "Good luck to us during the full moon, I guess," Carly grumbles.

"It's not like you want a bunch of marks people can see, either," Sam shoots back.

"I said you could mark me as much as you want *below* the neck."

"*Yeah*. And Cat sees me naked all the time, so. No marks for me."

"Whatever. What else?" Carly asks brusquely. The mood is already soured, they've both inched away from each other, putting space between them as they lie naked in bed, still facing each other, but now the stretch of sheets between them feels like the demarcation of a territorial dispute.

"The other is," Sam meets Carly's eyes, her expression guilty and frustrated. "The other is no sleepovers. I'm sorry," she adds quickly.

Carly feels absolutely *crestfallen*. “But that’s not fair!” she blurts.

“I know,” Sam says heavily, “But it’s what Cat needs.”

“But what about what *I* need?” Carly asks, voice getting sharper with frustration. “Cat gets to see you *all the time, every day*, and I get, what, a couple hours here and there a few times a week? That’s *bullshit!*”

“Carls, even if I wasn’t dating Cat, that’s probably what would be happening, anyway. We both have other stuff going on. Look at Tori and Jade. They almost never see each other during the week, and they live closer than we do.”

Sam has a good point, but right now, Carly doesn’t really care about good points. She just cares that she feels like she’s getting the short end of the stick. “I just want to feel like I’m your *girlfriend* and not some side piece you have to sneak off to see.”

“You *are* my girlfriend! You both are!” Sam protests.

“Then why does it feel like you’re always choosing Cat?” Carly asks.

Sam opens her mouth, but then closes it, eyebrows furrowing. “Is that your phone?”

“Is—oh, the pizza!” Carly gasps.

“Pizza? Where?” Sam asks eagerly.

“Hold on.” Carly rolls off the bed and gropes for her jeans to pull her phone out of her back pocket. “Hello?” she answers.

“Yeah, uh, I’m down here with a couple of pizzas for Carly and I can’t get in your building,” drawls a bored-sounding guy.

“Yes, sorry about that, I’ll be right down!” Carly tells him, then hangs up before he can reply and begins shoving her legs into her jeans.

“Wait, is there pizza here *right now*?” Sam asks, already sitting on the edge of the bed like she’s about to get up.

“Yeah, I just need to go and get it. Shit, where’s my bra?” Carly scans the apartment. She doesn’t understand how things can get lost in a space this small, but here she is.

“Screw the bra, you don’t need it,” Sam says urgently. Carly gives her a wounded look. “Hey, that is *totally* not an insult. I love your small tits!”

“You’re really making me feel better,” Carly replies sarcastically, but she’s smiling, all the same. She abandons her search for her bra and grabs her t-shirt and, for good measure, Sam’s leather jacket, just to try to make sure it’s not *super* obvious she isn’t wearing a bra. It’s a little short on her arms, but she likes the smell of it, the weight of it on her shoulders. She gives a little twirl at the doorway.



“My jacket looks great on you,” Sam husks, eyes roving over Carly, but then they snap up to her face. “Go get the pizza!” she urges.

“I’m going!” Carly calls, then hurries out of her apartment down to the front door. She’s glad she already tipped on her credit card when she ordered, because she realizes she forgot her wallet upstairs. And her keys. And her *underwear*.

The pizza man gives her something of a knowing look as he hands off the pizzas while Carly keeps the apartment door open with her foot, and Carly feels abruptly mortified. Is it so obvious that she just threw on clothes after sex?

She comes back up to the apartment, where Sam has put on underwear and a shirt, but nothing else, and immediately asks in a distraught voice, “Do I have sex hair?”

Sam glances at her. “Completely. What kind of pizza did you get?”

“*Sam!* You let me go down to get pizza with *sex hair*?!”

“Who cares? Pizza was on the line!”

“*I* care! I don’t need everyone to know I’ve just been...”

“Fucked?” Sam supplies with a smirk. “That must be why they call it just been fucked hair,” she muses, totally teasing Carly.

“You’re terrible,” Carly groans. “Just for that, I’m not sharing any of this pizza.”

“What? No, you’re not!” Sam argues, immediately looking distressed.

Carly just shoots her a haughty frown and pointedly pulls down one plate from her cabinet. “Let’s see. Should I start with Triple Meat or Supreme?” she wonders aloud.

“*Carls!* Come on, you can’t eat two pizzas by yourself!”

“Can’t I?” Carly challenges.

Sam stares at her in agony for a moment, but then she blinks, and steps back. “Okay.”

“Huh?” Carly asks.

“If you really think you can eat two entire pizzas...this I’ve got to see,” Sam smirks.

Carly knows her bluff has been effectively called. And she’s over teasing Sam anyway. She grabs her by the hem of her shirt and tugs her closer. “Come get some pizza, you asshole.”

“You really did get Triple Meat and Supreme, huh?” she asks, sniffing the air.

“I really did. And you’re starting with Supreme so you get some vegetables.”

“You sound like Cat,” Sam grumbles. She shoots Carly a guilty look as she says it, but the pizza has effectively broken the tension, and Carly just shakes her head, amused.

They sit down together on the couch with their pizza, and while they're no longer in the middle of a fight, the context of the conversation still hangs over them. Carly waits until Sam has finished a slice before she brings it back up. "I wasn't trying to be a bitch earlier," she starts.

Sam swallows her food and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, then answers. "I know."

Carly hands her a napkin, which she lets fall to her lap. "It just..." Carly lets out her breath as all the frustration and resentment starts to come back to her. "It just sucks that it feels like our relationship is entirely dictated by Cat."

"She needs me to take baby steps," Sam says evenly.

"But that's what I mean," Carly pushes. "*She* can make all the demands she wants of you, but if I try to do the same thing...I *can't*."

Sam lets out a frustrated breath through her nose. "I hear you, and I get it. But the whole reason we're allowed to *do* this is because of Cat."

"But she keeps making it so that we can only do it *her* way."

"Because that's what makes her feel safe," Sam insists. She takes another bite of pizza and gazes at Carly, her eyes serious, but also tired. "Like, she doesn't *get* anything out of us being together. That's why she gets some say in this."

"So then..." Carly tries to think about why this frustrates her so much. "So then, by definition, she's your, like, *first* priority girlfriend, and I'm your second."

Sam shakes her head. "No. I love you both, and I don't think of you that way, but...you have a point that you're different girlfriends to me." Carly raises her eyebrows significantly, inviting Sam to elaborate. Sam thoughtfully chews another bite of pizza before she continues. "So right now, you and me, what we have is new and *exciting*. Like, even though we dated before, we've been apart for long enough that *everything* feels new."

"Not *everything*," Carly drawls, looking at Sam slyly.

"No, you're right, but getting to do all the stuff we used to do together again *feels* new again."

"Except it's *not* everything we used to do," Carly argues.

"Hang on, I'm trying to make a point here," Sam interjects. "What you and I have is sexy and new and exciting. And what Cat and I have is...familiar, and stable. She and I have history."

"*We* have history," Carly reminds her.

"I know, but that's not really driving what goes on between us right now. Right now, we're still rediscovering each other. That's why we spent half the time last time talking."

“And the other half *not* talking,” Carly smirks. But then she starts to see what Sam means. “Which I guess is why you’re calling what we have right now new and exciting.”

“Because it *is*,” Sam says, looking Carly in the eye to gauge her reaction. Carly nods her agreement. “It’s not a *bad* thing.”

“I know, it just *feels* like we should be—I mean, we have this *deep* history together, we’ve known each other for *so* long, we were each other’s *firsts*—”

“But this is part of my point,” Sam interrupts. “Cat is my *home* right now, and you’re jealous of that part of our relationship. The part where we spend a whole lot of time together, sleep in the same bed. Because we used to have that. But Cat is jealous of the part where I’m so excited to be with you sometimes that I can barely think about anything else. Because she and *I* used to have that, too.”

Something about Sam describing Cat as her *home* makes Carly feel more jealous than anything. Hadn’t she done everything she possibly could to provide a space that could be home to her best friend, all through the years they knew each other in Seattle, because she knew that Sam’s apartment...wasn’t always a happy place? Granted, some of that had been Spencer’s doing, and sometimes Sam would overstay her welcome, but Carly...Carly thought that *she* might be home.

But then, she reflects, Sam and Cat had created their own space, together, one they collaborated on, one they made to suit the two of them. And Carly...hasn’t even bothered to decorate her apartment. Sam had thought she’d rented it *furnished*, for all the character this place has.

Carly supposes she can’t be Sam’s home if she hasn’t even managed to create her *own* home yet.

“I see what you mean,” is what she says instead. She thinks, again, about the request for no marks, because of what those marks would mean to Cat: clear evidence of the passion between them. And staying over...of course Cat would want to keep her grip on one of the few special things she shares with Sam: their domesticity. Carly may not like it, but she understands it.

“So you get why I’m doing my best to listen to what Cat needs?” Sam asks.

“I understand it, but it still doesn’t seem fair to me,” Carly answers, because that part is still true. It still chafes. “Because I can’t get what I’m jealous of because she won’t let me. But she can’t get what *she*’s jealous of because, I don’t know, you two are bored? And that’s not up to me, that’s not my fault.”

“We’re *not* bored,” Sam says sharply.

Carly is confused, and decides she’s finished with her pizza, putting her plate on the coffee table. “But you said she’s jealous of our...our *passion* and *excitement*, that you two used to have.”

“We *used* to have the excitement of everything being new. We still have a ton of passion and great sex, but...you know how sex changes when you’ve been having it for a while. Like it did with us. It was never bad or boring. But it wasn’t the same as it was in the very beginning.”

Sometimes, it feels to Carly like they got so little time with each other back then that they still *were* in the very beginning of their relationship. Mostly because she’d spent so long trying not to have the feelings she was definitely having, and she regrets all that lost time. But she knows that Sam is right. And she doesn’t really want to think that much about Sam and Cat’s passionate sex life. “Okay, I get it,” she says quickly.

Sam watches her thoughtfully as she finishes her third slice of pizza and starts on her fourth without even pausing. “Let me ask you something,” she abruptly says. “If you and I had never broken up, and I had met Cat, and fell in love with her, would you have let me be with her, too?”

Carly recoils slightly in surprise. Her immediate reaction is *no way*, but then she thinks about it. “I think if we were doing long distance when I was on the other side of the world, then it would be only fair.”

“What if we weren’t doing long distance?” Sam asks.

“What, like...if Cat moved to Seattle?”

“Or if we both came down here for you to go to college. I don’t care, the story isn’t important. But if we were in the same place, maybe *living* together, and I fell in love with Cat, would you have let me be with her?”

Carly thinks about Cat, and in the moment, she finds herself thinking about her *friend*, the girl who has never been anything but sweet to her, who welcomed her even when Sam was reticent, hesitant, who encouraged their friendship to blossom, who liked to sing with her, who checked on her when she freaked out in Beck’s trailer that one time. She thinks about Cat, without all the resentment and frustration of their current situation, the push and pull of sharing a girlfriend and both wanting something the other has.

She thinks about her friend, who she cares deeply about, who she *trusts* not to hurt her, who she hasn’t seen since she the full moon when she’d had eyes only for Sam and realizes she *misses* her, and...despite all of that, Carly doesn’t think she would ever choose to share Sam with her.

“I don’t think that I could,” she admits. Sam nods in a satisfied sort of way, and Carly feels *ashamed*, that she’s clearly not as good a person as Cat. “But it’s not the same. You and I already have a history, you didn’t step out, our feelings just came *back*. And also I’d never want to break you and Cat up because I can see how much she means to you, so it’s not like I’m against her. I *love* Cat! As a friend, of course.”

“Okay, fine, say we never figured our stuff out in high school, I left and fell in love with Cat, she and I broke up, you and I got together, and then I realized I still loved Cat and she still loved me. You still wouldn’t have let me be with her, just to make me happy?” Sam implores.

“I...I *don't know*.” All these scenarios Sam keeps laying out are making her head spin. “Fine, I guess I’m not as good as *Saint Cat*. I probably wouldn’t want to share you if it wasn’t the only way I could be with you!”

Sam looks hurt. “I’m not trying to say that Cat is *better* than you. I’m just trying to get you to think about things from her point of view.”

“All that’s doing is making me feel even less like I deserve to be with you.”

“It’s not about *deserve*—” Sam rubs her face and puts down her plate of pizza and reaches for Carly. “Come here.”

Carly had been trying hard not to cry, but she hadn’t realized how badly she’d been failing until she’s crying on Sam’s shoulder. She wonders how many times in her life she’s turned to Sam for comfort like this. She wonders how many times Sam has put aside food to comfort her. *Probably never*, she reflects, *this might be a first*. When she thinks about how much Sam must love her to do that, she starts crying harder.

“You’re alright,” Sam murmurs as she holds her. Carly pulls away before she’s really finished crying, mostly because she feels so stupid.

“Sorry,” she manages.

“Don’t be,” Sam says, immediately picking back up her pizza, though she still watches Carly with compassionate eyes.

“I don’t know why—I guess it all just got to me,” Carly sighs. She idly picks up a pizza crust she left on her plate and chews it. Sam is still watching her, so she figures she’s supposed to say more. “I guess, I thought all I wanted was you, whatever the circumstances, but it’s so much harder sharing you than I ever thought it would be.”

“I know. I’m the one stuck in the middle between you two while you both get upset at each other.” Sam twists her mouth. “You really should both be upset with *me*. I’m the one who fell in love twice.”

“It’s easier to be mad at each other so we don’t spoil what we get to have with you,” Carly says. “But really, it’s so *stupid* to be mad at Cat. She’s never been anything but sweet to me and I think she’s amazing.”

“She feels the same way about you.” Sam smirks. “Even before she started wanting to make out with you.”

“*Sam*,” Carly warns, then shakes her head. “Is this going to get easier?” she asks.

It’s kind of supposed to be rhetorical, but Sam seems to have an answer. “I think it will,” she says thoughtfully. “I think that once more time has passed, Cat will see that I’m not going anywhere, and...I think she won’t worry as much. I think we’ll be on more equal footing then. You both will *feel* like you’re even in my eyes, the way I know you are in my heart.”

“So you’re saying I just have to wait it out, huh?”

“Guess so. ‘Til Cat feels safer.”

Carly nods slowly. “It’s a good thing I’m good at waiting for you.”

Sam chuckles. “You? I’m the one who waited for years for you to get your gay head out of your ass.”

“*Bisexual*,” Carly corrects.

“Whatever. Gay for me,” Sam insists stubbornly.

Carly laughs. “Sorry not sorry for being your gay awakening.”

“Like I wasn’t yours?” Sam challenges. She tilts her head thoughtfully. “You know, you and Cat have a lot in common. I mean, I was her first, I was yours.”

“...Yeah?” Carly asks warily, not really seeing the point Sam is trying to make.

“I’m just saying it sucks that you two aren’t really talking because it feels like you could have a lot to talk about.”

“Like you?” Carly asks incredulously. Sam just shrugs in a smug sort of way. “Yeah, right, you really think we want to sit around chatting about sex with you?”

“You’d never be bored,” Sam answers cockily.

“More likely we’d sit around talking about how *annoying* you are,” Carly shoots back.

“As long as I’m always on your mind,” Sam says airily.

“I’m sure you are,” Carly rolls her eyes. “Annoying people are good at that.”

Sam lightly shoves her shoulder. Carly shoves back. Within moments, pizza is apparently forgotten as they kiss each other on the sofa, Carly only interested in prolonging their evening as much as possible, before Sam has to go home.

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Sam comes back from Carly’s apartment around the same time as last time, just when Cat is starting to feel so bored that she’s either going to go to bed or start rearranging the entire kitchen, just for something to do. She wonders if Sam would even notice if the kitchen got rearranged. Probably not until she went looking for something.

But Sam comes home, looking relaxed and happy. This time, Cat doesn’t feel like jumping up to greet her. “Hi,” she merely says evenly, not moving from her place on the couch where she’s flipping channels.

“Hey, babe,” Sam greets, taking off her jacket and smiling at her.

“Did you talk to her?” Cat asks. A big reason Cat had agreed to and even encouraged this mid-week visit, so soon after the first one, was because Sam had wanted to talk to Carly in person about Cat’s new restrictions: no marks and no overnight visits. Cat had agreed that it was only fair to have the conversation face to face. It’s what she would want if she were in Carly’s place.

“Yeah, we talked,” Sam tells her, leaping effortlessly over the back of the couch to settle next to Cat on it. “She, um, doesn’t love it, but she agreed.”

“Good,” Cat says, primly. At least that’s settled.

Cat changes the channel as they sit together, and they watch a Ginger Fox music video for a minute or so. “She’s a real piece of work,” Sam mumbles idly.

“Mmhmm,” Cat responds quietly. She’s heard Sam’s stories about working with her before. After that music video, the channel switches to commercials, and not even interesting ones for things like pajelehoochos, so Cat changes the channel. The news. *Boring*. She groans like it’s a personal attack.

A few channels later, Cat lands on an old episode of *I Married My Mom*. She tries to decide if today is a day in which her enjoyment of the old program is overshadowed by her treatment at the hands of Mona Patterson herself. While she’s squinting at the woman’s face, fifty years younger, Sam asks, “What do you want to do this weekend?”

Cat glances at her. “We’re babysitting Saturday,” she reminds her, assuming this is about the *next* time Sam can go see Carly.

“I know. I meant like...maybe we could do something, just you and me, on Saturday evening after the kid goes home.”

Cat looks at her more fully now. “Yeah?” she asks.

“Of course,” Sam replies with a smile. “What do you think?”

Cat feels warm that Sam is making an effort. But when her eyes land on a still-dark hickey, she feels a wave of stubbornness rise within her. She wonders if Sam would even have considered this if Cat hadn’t asked her to try to prioritize her. She wonders if Sam even *wants* to do something special with her, or if she’s just a checkbox Sam needs to mark off. Keep Cat happy so she can have what she wants.

Well if Sam wants to do something special with her, she can figure it out herself. Cat is done spelling out exactly what she wants.

“Sure,” she says lightly. “Surprise me.”

Sam’s grin falters slightly, but then she nods. “Got it.”

Sam’s going to have to *actually* make an effort for Cat to feel like she’s wanted.

The rest of the evening passes as normal, and so does the next day at school, and then, it's the weekend. Cat should be excited, but all she can really think about is homework, and Sam and Carly.

Sam and Carly have met up for sex *twice* this week already, and will probably meet up again over the weekend. Meanwhile, she and Sam haven't had sex in almost a week. Not that that's unusual for them at this point in their lives, with school schedules and trying to carve out time with friends. But Cat doesn't like the feeling that she's being outmatched, that something (Sam's attention? Sam's sexual energy?) is being taken away from her that she deserves.

So after they get home from school, as they sit on the couch together, both idly looking through school materials to gauge how much homework they'll have to deal with this weekend, Cat leans over to kiss Sam, with purpose.

Sam pulls away when the kiss is over, looking a little giddy. "What was that for?"

"I'm not allowed to kiss my girlfriend for no reason?" Cat asks pointedly.

"Good point," Sam answers, leaning in for another kiss.

Cat accepts her kiss, closing her eyes, feeling Sam's hand at the back of her neck, the way she gently deepens the kiss. A dark part of her wonders if Sam is kissing her differently, if Sam is kissing her the way she kisses *Carly*.

She begins kissing along Sam's jaw to her neck, hearing the soft exhale of pleasure as Sam reacts, and Cat chooses a spot just above her collarbone and sucks at it delicately.

Sam stiffens. "What're you doing?"

"Kissing you," Cat replies, biting gently.

Sam's breath hitches. "Wait, no. You probably shouldn't."

"I shouldn't kiss you?" Cat asks.

"You shouldn't...you shouldn't leave a mark," Sam gasps out.

"Why not?" Cat challenges, lips playing with that same little patch of skin.

"*Cat*," Sam says, more sharply now, and she grabs Cat's shoulders and puts some distance between them.

Cat stares at Sam, feeling frustrated and angrier by the second. "Why shouldn't I make you feel good?" Cat asks.

Sam looks flushed, and Cat can't tell if she's angry or aroused. It makes her *excited*. "It's not fair to Carly," Sam says firmly.



“It’s not like she doesn’t know we *do* it,” Cat replies dismissively, and lunges back toward Sam’s neck.

In a moment, Sam is on top of her, straddling her lap, and both of Cat’s wrists are pinned to the couch. She takes a deep, shaky breath, because Sam looks *furious*, and Cat can’t help that it excites her. She doesn’t know what Sam is going to do next, and it’s terrifying, and that free fall into the unknown with Sam is something she hasn’t felt in *a while*.

Sam looks like she’s going to say something, but then she’s kissing Cat, *hard*, their teeth knocking together, the scrape of it sending shivers down Cat’s spine. She moans into Sam’s mouth, hands twisting to try to get loose, but Sam pins her back in place with another forceful shove that makes Cat whimper, and then Sam’s teeth are at her neck.

“That’s not fair,” Cat gasps.

“I don’t care,” Sam growls back, and she releases one of Cat’s hands just to shove her own hand up Cat’s shirt, groping her roughly.

Things progress quickly, and soon they’re having fully clothed sex, hands shoved awkwardly into pants and up skirts, tightly pressed between flesh and fabric, fingers stroking roughly, but the excitement of their spontaneous rough *jealous* sex is what’s really driving the encounter, and when Cat comes, it’s not because she’s full of the knowledge of just how much Sam loves her, it’s because she’s afraid that Sam *despises* her in the moment, and the fear of it *thrills* her to the core.

When she opens her eyes, they’re still facing each other, hot breath mingling between them, and Sam’s blue eyes are like melting ice. Cat realizes she has no idea if Sam came, too, but her fingers, shoved awkwardly into Sam’s pants, are no longer moving, but neither is Sam, she seems to be calming down.

Cat has no idea what to say in the wake of sex that felt *dangerous*. And apparently, Sam doesn’t either, because they just stare at each other in shock for a long moment until abruptly, Cat starts crying. It’s not something that she had even been aware was brewing, not something she had time to stifle. She’d felt elated and anxious and thrilled and suddenly—tears.

Instantly, Sam shifts, moving next to Cat on the couch and wrapping her arms around her. Cat realizes that the sounds coming out of her are more like laughter than sobs, but she supposes it doesn’t sound that much different to Sam, who murmurs in her ear, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Cat finds her voice. “Don’t be sorry,” she manages between sobbing laughs.

“But—I hurt you, didn’t I?” Sam asks in a small voice.

“No,” Cat answers. She shifts closer to Sam, wrapping her own arms around her. “But it feels good for you to hold me,” she says quietly.

So Sam does, reclining on the sofa and coaxing Cat to lie half on top of her, and Sam wraps her arms around her tightly. They’re both quiet, as all of the sounds associated with Cat’s

emotional release seem to have been expunged and she closes her eyes and rests with Sam. If she thinks about it, it's almost like she can still feel Sam's hands around her wrists, Sam rough fingers pressing against her, Sam's teeth at her throat—

Cat shivers. Sam holds her tighter. "I'm okay," Cat assures her, blinking her eyes open to remind herself of where she is in the world.

"What...*happened*?" Sam asks in a small voice.

"We had sex," Cat answers matter-of-factly, closing her eyes again.

"That was...different." Sam shakes her head.

"It was *exactly* what I needed," Cat sighs.

Cat thinks Sam isn't going to answer because so much time passes, but finally, Sam says, "I don't think that's what I want sex with you to be like."

Cat lifts her head to look at her. "Why not? You know I like it when you're rough."

Sam laughs, but it's hollow, humorless. "That felt different from just me being *rough*. That felt...*wrong*." She looks at Cat curiously for a moment. "You've never really been so *into* leaving hickeys on me before," she points out.

Cat finds she can't meet her eye but she shrugs in a show of nonchalance. "I just really, really wanted to all of a sudden."

"Because of Carly." It's not really a question.

Cat hesitates. But then she presses her lips together. "I keep having to *see* all the marks she left *all over you* that first night you were together. It was making me *crazy*!"

"So you wanted to make her look at a mark of your own," Sam says quietly.

Cat burns with a mix of shame and jealousy. "Because it's *not fair*."

Sam sighs tiredly. "Seems like there's a lot of that going around."

"What?" Cat asks. At the moment, she's in no condition to extrapolate past her own experience.

Sam moves to sit up, nudging Cat to move with her, so that they're sitting next to each other now. "Just had a whole talk yesterday with Carly about what she thinks isn't fair about sharing me with you," she says off-handedly.

"Oh," Cat answers quietly. But now that she's thinking about it, she knows. "Let me guess, the no marks and no overnights are unfair?"

"Yep. But also, what Carly really wishes she could have is what *we* have. The time spent together. The living together. The...what's the word I want. Domestic shit?"

“Well she *can't*,” Cat says hotly. “Because you can’t live in two places at once.”

Sam has a look on her face that suggests she doesn’t think Cat is entirely correct, but she doesn’t push. Instead, she says, “I had to get her to think about how you’re jealous of the newness and excitement I have with her to get her to see there’s two sides to this.”

Cat bristles a little having her emotional state summed up so succinctly. It feels much more *complicated* than just being jealous of the newness of their connection. There’s *so much more* to Cat’s emotional state: the fact that they’ve been together before, the fact that Carly is Sam’s first, the fact that they’re both werewolves and have an entire feral connection Cat can’t even fathom, the fact that they’re best friends and know each other better than Cat even knows Sam, the fact that Cat feels like she could be so easily forgotten, replaced, by someone she has such confusing feelings for, a lingering love overlaid against a frustrated resentment. “It’s not *that* simple.”

Sam shrugs. “I’m sure it’s not. It’s not so simple for Carly, either. But it helps me not feel so torn when you two can at least see things the way the other one does.”

Cat has no problem understanding Carly’s perspective. She’s just reluctant to let Carly have more of Sam when it already feels like she has *so much* of her. So much attention, so much anticipation, so much sex. But she doesn’t want to talk about Carly anymore. Instead, she thinks about Sam saying the main source of her jealousy had been excitement. “Well, at least the sex we just had was *exciting* enough for me,” she says sharply, though without any sarcasm.

Sam’s face falls a little and she looks away. “I don’t want to do that to you again,” she murmurs.

“But *why*?” Cat asks again. But before Sam can answer, Cat notices a purpling bruise on her neck, just above her collarbone. “Oh,” she utters.

“What?” Sam turns back to look at her, and her hair falls over the mark again.

Cat reaches over to brush the hair aside. “I left a mark,” she says simply.

Sam reaches up to touch her neck, as if she might be able to feel the hickey itself. “Oh. Shit,” she curses, but there’s not a lot of heat behind it.

“Sorry,” Cat utters, though inside, she’s *gleeful* at the idea that Carly will have to look at a hickey that *she* didn’t put on Sam.

“It’s okay,” Sam reaches for her hand. “No more after this from either of you.”

“Okay. I promise,” Cat squeezes her hand.

They exchange weak smiles. It feels like there’s still a lot hanging between them, but neither of them has the energy to deal with any of it. Sam picks up her backpack and shoves her school papers in it. “When’s dinner?” she asks.

Cat glances at her watch. “I’ll start it in a couple of hours. There’s canned ham in the cupboard if you need a snack.”

Sam smiles at her, and it’s sweet and genuine. “You always know just what I need.”

Cat feels a pang in her chest that what *she* needs, Sam seems unwilling to give her.

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It isn’t that the messy, aggressive sex on the couch with Cat wasn’t *hot*. It *was*. It was *scorching*.

But that’s exactly what worries Sam. She doesn’t want to do it with Cat again because she worries about how easy it would be to step over the line.

There had always been a part of Sam that conflated violence and love. As far back as she could remember, there were always light swats and slaps from her mother. It never really hurt beyond the initial shock of it, and Sam accepted the tactile sensation as the refocusing tool her mother intended it to be.

That continued until Sam started hitting back, and then, the only physical contact between her and her mother were the fights that broke out every few months for years. Often, they were in wolf form, but not always.

Sam had always assumed, once she learned she was a werewolf, that this was just how werewolf families operated. After all, it was common for her grandmother to discipline her mom and her uncles with swats to the nose (something that felt worse when you were human, somehow), or for her uncles to settle disagreements with their fists. Really, it wasn’t until she actually thought about the way Spencer and Carly interacted that she began to think that maybe the issue was just *her* family. As usual.

But physical aggression had its place in Sam’s repertoire of expressing her emotions. It had a large place, in fact. The closer she and Freddie grew as they started to become actual friends, the more Sam fought with him. It was partly some kind of territorial jealousy as she became more and more aware that the crush he had on Carly was one that she shared. But it was also her way of challenging him to accept her. *All* of her, even the difficult parts. And Freddie... *had*. To the point of actually wanting to *date* her, as bizarre as that seems in retrospect.

However, there had always been one person with whom she’d never conflated love and violence: Carly. From the moment they’d met, Sam knew she’d never, ever hurt Carly. And as they grew closer, and Sam’s feelings deepened, she began to understand that love could be something softer, sweeter.

Of course, they also discovered, together, the passion of sex beneath the full moon, the kind of animalistic sex that blended the aggression Sam knew well with the passion she and Carly shared. But that had never felt *violent*. That had never felt *painful*. It had felt *pure*, in that base instinctual way that a lot of werewolf feelings could be, except they were in their soft human bodies. It felt *validating*, *grounding*, and full of love. A safe outlet for the kind of very

physical passion that was close enough to the violence Sam conflated with love to satisfy a deep and difficult part of herself.

What had happened with Cat felt *violent*.

And Cat is another person who Sam has never, ever wanted to hurt, from the moment they met. She didn't think she was *capable* of it.

The wild, lunar-influenced sex that she and Carly have is *different*, not just because they both understand *exactly* where the impulse comes from, but because Carly is a *werewolf*. Carly can *handle* Sam at her most ferocious, and give it right back to her.

But Cat is a *human*.

Admittedly, the rough sex she and Cat have is thrilling to Sam in part *because* of this exact distinction: Cat *is* a human. She's delicate, she's dainty. The threat of Sam discovering what she can take and knowing she'll never actually *hurt* Cat is part of the excitement for them both. But today it felt like Sam was treating her...more like *Carly*. And the last thing she wants is to lose control like she does with Carly, knowing Carly can handle her.

Because she worries that Cat *can't*. And it would be far too easy for Sam to take things too far and hurt Cat, if she lets herself fall into that feral, aggressive state with her again.

*Especially* because Sam had been angry, and had let that overshadow her love and affection.

And *especially* because...it had felt *amazing* to be so brutal with Cat in that moment, in a way that makes Sam feel sick to her stomach to look back on.

But Sam has something else to worry about, on top of all of this. While Cat hums cheerfully in the front room, sorting through school paperwork, Sam takes her can of ham back to the bedroom and texts Jade.

**Dude you've gotta help me**

There's no immediate reply, and Sam doesn't have the patience to wait. So she calls Jade instead.

She hears the line connect, and then a hollow, rushing sound and a plastic clattering, and then Jade's voice, sounding a bit distant. "You'd better have a good reason to be calling."

"I do. I really do. Where are you?"

"Pulling into Tori's driveway. You're on speakerphone, by the way."

"Oh. Is Tori there, too?"

“Not yet. That’s why you’d better have a good reason to be calling. We’re about to go out.”

“Like on a date?”

Sam can hear the eyeroll. “No, to do our taxes. Although, actually, I’d better check in with my mom about that...”

Sam doesn’t even want to think about...whatever she might have to do about her taxes.

“Well, I need your help.”

“Does it need to be *right now*?” Jade presses, and then, Sam hears a mechanical clacking, and Tori’s voice, “Hey! Oh, wait, are you on the phone?” Her voice drops to a whisper.

“It’s Sam,” Jade reports, and then the door closes, and Sam *hears* them kiss.

“Gross, you guys. But good, maybe Tori can help, too.”

“Help with *what*?” Jade asks, clearly annoyed.

“I have to take Cat on a date tomorrow. And it has to be *special*. And I have *no idea* what to do!”

“Haven’t you been dating for over a year?” Tori asks tentatively.

“Well, *yeah*, but—”

“What do you mean, you *have* to take her on a date?” Jade interrupts.

Sam groans. “I didn’t mean it *that* way. But like, I’m trying to make sure that she still feels special and important to me. You know, because of Carly.” There’s a significant, knowing grunt from one of them—Sam’s pretty sure it’s Jade. “And that’s why I’m freaking out. I don’t think dinner and a movie is going to cut it. It needs to be *special*.”

“I still don’t know why you’re making this our problem. She’s *your* girlfriend. This should be easy for you,” Jade drawls.

“Sometimes it’s hard to come up with something special,” Tori cuts in sympathetically. “I mean. *You* got Beck a can of lemonade for his birthday one time.”

“How many times do I have to defend this decision!? He *likes* lemonade! He *drank* it!”

“But was it special?” Tori presses.

“*He* was supposed to be making *me* feel special!” Jade shoots back.

“On *his* birthday?” Tori asks incredulously.

“Guys,” Sam cuts in, “Can we get back to *my* problem?”

“Sure, fine,” Jade says quickly, perhaps glad to get off the topic of her own crappy present to her ex. “What do you normally do on a date?”

“And since this is kind of about Carly,” Tori cuts in, “what have you been doing with her that Cat is going to compare your date to?”

“Uhhh,” Sam drawls. “Carly and I...have really only been...uh...”

“Oh, you haven’t even left her apartment,” Jade chuckles.

“Yeah,” Sam admits.

“You should’ve known that,” Jade ribs Tori.

“You’re right. Okay then, what’s a normal date for you and Cat like?” Tori steers them back onto a relevant topic.

“I mean.” Sam thinks about it. “We went to your school dance. We’ve done dinner and a movie. We’ll go for walks on the beach. Like, a picnic if it’s not too windy. Stuff like that.”

“Okay...” Jade drawls. “Pretty basic, but not bad.”

“Jade, we’re literally going for dinner and a movie tonight,” Tori points out.

“*Yeah*, but it’s sushi and a theater that shows specially curated movies on *actual* 35mm *film*.”

“Okay, that’s actually a fair point,” Tori agrees, then elaborates for Sam’s benefit. “So sushi is something significant for us—one of the first times we actually connected as friends was over sushi.”

“We were *not* friends,” Jade insists.

Tori ignores her. “And the theater appeals to us both for obvious reasons but especially to Jade, for reasons she could talk about for twenty minutes if you let her.”

“The way light projects through *actual film* makes a *huge* difference in how it’s perceived by the human eye versus the flat, *lifeless quality* of *digital projection*,” Jade begins hotly.

“Like I said,” Tori says fondly, cutting her off before she can continue. “So, maybe you can find something that references how you guys met, or something that Cat is especially interested in?”

“Uh, we met in a trash truck, and I don’t think dumpster diving is going to be Cat’s idea of a good time,” Sam says doubtfully.

“I have so many questions,” Jade says. “But I’ll start with, do *you* want to go dumpster diving sometime?”

“Yeah, absolutely!” Sam says enthusiastically.

“Okay, so we successfully set up a date for you and *Jade*,” Tori sighs. “What about something Cat really enjoys?”

“Uhh,” Sam squints out the window as she considers this. “I know she likes...like, singing, and theater and stuff.”

“You could go to Karaoke Dokie!” Tori suggests brightly.

“I guess that’s an idea,” Sam says reluctantly.

“You sound *thrilled*,” Jade notes.

“I just don’t know how much bad karaoke I can sit through,” Sam complains. “When it’s a party with *you* guys, at least I know everybody’s going to sound good.”

“Yeah, some of the people there are...eh,” Tori admits.

“Uh huh. I remember from the time Jade and I went last year when we first met.”

“And in my experience, that crowd was pretty par for the course,” Jade says. “What about theater?”

“I guess I could see if there’s anything playing that still has tickets,” Sam says listlessly.

“Again. You’re thrilled,” Jade mocks.

Sam sighs. “Look, after Cat’s Baberaham Lincoln disaster, I think I’ve lost my interest in avant garde theater. Unless it’s something our friends do.”

“I didn’t think Cat’s one woman show was a disaster,” Tori frowns.

“*You* weren’t behind the scenes,” Sam says darkly.

“Sam, no offense, but what do you and Cat even have in common if you don’t like to do anything she loves?” Jade asks pointedly.

“We have a lot in common! We both like—” but she falls silent, because it’s true that most of what they enjoy are things they do together *all the time*. Like watching TV, or eating together. Cat even manages to make babysitting fun.

*And* they love their time together when Sam is a wolf. It makes her think about what Tori said, about sushi representing a milestone in her relationship with Jade. Sam telling Cat that she’s a werewolf is another milestone. Almost as much of one as the first time they kissed, after the motorcycle stunt that went wrong. But there’s not really anything about *that* that Sam wants to relive.

But Cat petting her, feeding her, chasing her...that seems like something she can work with.

“Wait, I think I’ve got it,” Sam says abruptly.

“Care to share?” Jade drawls.

“Nope. No time to explain. Thanks, you guys.”



“You’re not even going to *tell*—” Jade starts.

“Bye, Sam!” Tori cuts her off. “Text us and let us know how it goes!”

Sam hangs up as she hears the start of Jade retorting with “*Tori!*”

She emerges from the back of the house and grabs her leather jacket. Cat is now sitting at the dining nook, flipping through an old cookbook. Sam is intrigued, but she’s on a mission.

“I’ve got to go out for a little bit.”

Cat lifts her gaze. Her expression is slightly guarded. “Okay?” She sounds mildly suspicious.

“I’ll be back before dinner,” Sam promises. She can see something dark is still in Cat’s expression, and she wants to try to reassure her. “This has nothing to do with Carly,” she states plainly.

Cat’s eyes drop, but Sam can almost *feel* her relief. “Okay,” she says briskly. “Have fun, I’ll see you soon!”

“Love you!” Sam calls over her shoulder as she heads out onto the patio to her motorcycle. She dimly hears Cat reply in kind as she leaves.

But in spite of her hurry to leave, and despite knowing where she wants to go, it isn’t until she’s about to pull out onto the street that she realizes she doesn’t actually know how to get there. She takes a moment to pull up directions and then sets off.

She pulls up in front of Ground Beans & Toe Beans, one of the local cat cafes. She’s seen the place in passing, and she wants to scope it out in person. Through the front window, she can see people sitting around on soft, plush furniture with cups of coffee in their hands and kittens in their laps. It looks perfect.

Sam strolls in and is immediately greeted by a young woman at a desk. “Hi, there! Do you have an appointment?”

Sam is caught a little off guard. She’d intended to just go in and check things out further. “Uh, no? Do I need one?”

“It’s recommended, but we do take some walk-ins. Let me finish with this gentleman here and I’ll check when the next available walk-in slot is.”

“Sure, fine,” Sam mutters. She gazes through the glass at the little room full of coffee and kittens until it’s her turn with the girl at the counter. “Actually, if you take appointments, I’d like two people for tomorrow evening,” she says. “Maybe around six?”

The girl looks sympathetic. “Oh, no, I’m so sorry. I actually just sold our last two slots for tomorrow to that young man there.”

The guy is not quite out the door and he freezes, turning to stare at Sam. Sam glances at him, but quickly turns her attention back to the woman at the counter. “Wait. What? You have nothing for tomorrow?”

“No, I’m so sorry, we just sold our last six o’clock time slots.”

Sam turns to the young man and cracks her knuckles. “We’ll be taking this outside,” she says in a semi-menacing tone.

“I have to ask that you not resort to violence, it upsets the cats!” the woman calls after them. Sam ignores her, because she’s not planning to resort to violence, just, you know, threats and intimidation.

Now that she’s face to face with the guy, she thinks he seems a little familiar. He doesn’t really *smell* familiar, though, which is odd. He has curly, light-colored hair of a somewhat indistinct shade between blond and brown, and he’s staring at her in a way that unnerves her. “You’re Sam Puckett,” he states. His voice has a whispery quality that’s also unsettling.

“Yeah, so?” Sam asks.

He continues to stare. “I’ve been on your show.”

Maybe *that’s* why he’s familiar. “What, like a talent submission?” she asks as she tries to place him.

“No,” he answers. “On your last episode. I was in Jade’s short film.”

*Ohh!* Sam absolutely remembers now, but she keeps her face stoic, not wanting to warm up to the person she’s just about to threaten to within an inch of his life. “I see,” is all she says.

“You’re dating Cat Valentine, aren’t you?”

Sam scowls. “How do you know that?”

“Because I went to school with her. I saw you with her all last year.”

Either Sam needs to pay better attention to her surroundings, or this guy is extra creepy-sneaky. Sam is betting on the latter. It *does* unnerve her that she was apparently in the same place as this dude fairly frequently and only recognizes him from Jade’s short film. “Okay, so yeah, I’m with Cat. And that’s why I need those tickets,” she tells him, directly and forcefully.

His eyes widen slightly, which is impressive since they’re already kind of wide. “You need them for Cat?”

“Yeah, for Cat,” Sam answers. Maybe this is a point of leverage. “It’s really, *really* important to her,” she says, really laying on the sympathy.

The guy nods seriously. “Well, I got these for my sister for her birthday.”

“Then go get your sister something else,” Sam instructs impatiently.

He looks like he’s considering this. Finally, he says, “I only got this for her because I was out of ideas.”

Sam is desperate at this point. “Then maybe I can help you come up with one,” she suggests irritably.

“Oh, I already have one,” he says cryptically. Sam feels the hair on the back of her neck stand up. What is *with* this guy?

“Then can I have your tickets?” Sam all but demands.

“I’ll give you the tickets...in exchange for two things from you.”

Sam is sure she isn’t going to like this. But what other choice does she have? “I’m listening.”

“The first thing is, I want a lock of your hair.” Okay, not the weirdest thing Sam has heard. In fact, she’d been asked by Dice for this— “There was a guy selling celebrity hair once a few years ago,” the weird guy states, exactly as Sam remembers the way she met Dice. “But I got outbid on your hair. I know my sister would freak out and it’d be a way better present than a trip to the cat cafe.”

“Sure, fine, you can have a lock of my hair. What else?”

“You know Jade West.” It’s much more of a statement than a question, but Sam nods anyway. “I need her phone number.”

Sam hesitates. “Why don’t you have it? You’ve worked with her.”

“Because she would only ever call me, and her phone number is blocked. And she never tied her phone number to her account on The Slap, because I hacked—” He cuts himself off, then continues quickly. “I need to be able to contact her exactly *because* we worked together,” he claims.

Sam doesn’t really like this, but at this point, she’s willing to do whatever to get these tickets. Besides, she knows Jade can handle herself. “Sure, fine. I’ll give you Jade’s phone number.” She can also always switch some digits around, or change one.

“Yippee!” he cries, an abrupt departure from his demeanor so far. It’s jarring. Everything about this guy is jarring. If Sam were someone else, she’d worry about what she’d gotten herself into.

“Okay, so give me the tickets,” Sam demands.

He looks nervous, but holds his ground. “Give me your hair and the phone number first.”

Sam gestures around her. “How do you expect me to just chop off my hair in the middle of the street?”

He gazes through the window of the cat cafe. “Maybe they have a pair of scissors we can borrow.”

Sam can just imagine how that conversation would go. “Where’s Jade when you need her?” she mutters. Keeping a pair of scissors in her boot must come in handy more than Sam

initially thought.

“Where, indeed?” the guy echoes wistfully.

“Okay, wait, I have an idea. Hold on, I’m parked over there.” She starts walking quickly toward her motorcycle.

She’d *thought* that telling him to “hold on” made it obvious she didn’t want to be followed, but he’s right behind her. “Sweet ride,” he tells her genuinely as she stands by her bike.

“Yeah, yeah,” she mutters. She opens the trunk beneath her seat and pulls out a folding knife. It’s not very big; the blade is less than three inches long. Sam has never really been in the habit of carrying a knife because that was the kind of thing that could get her sent back to juvie, back when she lived in Seattle, but she did make sure to have one with her bike at all times, because it was a useful tool. She holds it up. “I can use this.”

He nods appreciatively, then looks around. “Maybe we’d better go somewhere less open. People might think I’m attacking you.”

Sam has no intention of giving him the knife to cut off her hair, but he has a point. “Fine.” She gestures toward a side street at the end of the block.

The side street isn’t really an alley, but it’s certainly not busy. With cars parked all along both sides of the street, what’s left barely looks big enough for two cars to drive down it, even though it is technically a two way street. But no cars are driving by, and no pedestrians are walking past, as she and this weirdo she just met walk down the side street just enough that anyone passing along the main road probably won’t notice them.

“Okay,” Sam says, and opens her knife. The action makes her companion flinch a little bit, which she can’t really blame him for, and then he reaches out his hand as if to take it. Sam ignores the gesture and grabs at a length of hair at the back of her head, near the base of her skull. She doesn’t cut the whole thing off—that would be difficult to manage without possibly cutting herself—but she does cut the strand roughly in half, sawing at it with the sharp edge of her knife, until she has a lock of wavy blonde hair a few inches long in her hand. “Here.” She thrusts it at the guy.

He takes it delicately. “Thank you.” He holds it for a moment; Sam assumes he just doesn’t know what to do with it, but then he lifts it to his face and sniffs deeply.

“Okay, do that on your own time,” Sam admonishes. Really, with the way they’re standing out of the way on a side street, with him huffing on what she just gave him, this is starting to feel sketchy. Like drug deal levels of sketchy.

“Right,” he murmurs, looking a little euphoric after huffing her hair. She remembers Cat huffing some celebrity hair when they’d first met. She can’t even remember who it belonged to. She doesn’t get it, but then, her nose is strong enough that she doesn’t have to *huff* to experience the scent of someone. So maybe this is the closest humans can get to the joy of having a sense of smell like hers.

She pities them a little.

The guy takes out his wallet and twists and folds Sam's hair up and sticks it in the billfold for safekeeping. Sam almost tells him the smell of cash will probably interfere with the smell of her hair, but it's no longer attached to her head, so she doesn't care what happens to it.

"The tickets?" she prompts.

He reaches into his pocket and hands her...one ticket. "I'll give you the other when I get my phone number."

"Fine then, get out your phone," she instructs him. She pulls out her own, because it's not like she knows Jade's number off the top of her head.

"Okay." He pulls out his phone. "Ready for my number?"

"Why would I want your number?" Sam asks, mildly disgusted.

"Aren't you going to send me your contact listing for her?"

"No..." Sam answers slowly. She'd intended to read off Jade's number, maybe switch a number or two, but she wasn't about to do anything that would allow this weirdo who just huffed a lock of her hair to have *her* phone number on top of that. "I was just going to read you her number."

"How do I know you won't change out a number?" he asks.

Well, damn, he's shrewd. Sam supposes he's probably learned to watch out for this from experience, since he's so creepy. "Because you're giving me something I really want in exchange for it?" she suggests.

He looks doubtful. "Open up her contact info and turn your screen to me," he demands.

Well. Sam can work a phone *fast*—she did win a texting competition, after all—but she's not sure she's so fast that he isn't going to notice if she quickly tries to change Jade's number in her phone. She tries it anyway, and manages to switch the last digit of Jade's phone number while pretending to try to find her in her contact list. "Okay, here," she says, turning her phone screen toward him.

He stares at her phone and very slowly, very carefully, copies the number into his phone, seeming to triple check every digit as he does. Sam hopes he isn't about to try the number, but if he does, and she only gets one ticket, she can work with that.

Luckily, he doesn't try the number right away, and puts his phone away. "Ticket?" Sam prompts.

He pulls out the second ticket and she has it in her hand. Relief washes over her. "So we have a deal?" he asks.

Well, uh, *yeah*. They just completed the deal. “Yep. See ya.” Sam starts walking toward her motorcycle, leaving him standing on the side street next to the dumpsters behind the Thai restaurant with a lock of her hair in his wallet and a fake number in his phone.

And she didn’t even really have to resort to threats. *Huh*. Maybe she’s getting softer.

## Storms [Death]

They're babysitting Chloe, Max, and Darby from about noon to five on Saturday. It's not so bad, because they're good kids, overall, but the time frame means they're responsible for giving them a snack and a meal.

It helps that these are kids that Sam generally likes. Cat rarely has a problem with any of the kids they babysit (as long as they're not evil and British), but Sam is more selective, and sometimes it can be hard to get her to focus on the job when they're babysitting a kid she's not enthusiastic about. Cat wonders if it's because these were the first kids they ever babysit together, the first kids who gave them a clue that they could make a living at this.

Or maybe it's because their mom, Melinda, is attractive and never blinks at whatever they charge to watch her kids. Cat guesses she's just glad to have some time to herself. Watching three kids for five hours, even with Sam's help, can be exhausting. She can't imagine what it's like for Melinda to do it all the time.

But luckily, Sam is cheerful today, and is doing great with the kids. While Cat puts together a snack not too long after they arrive, she watches as Sam encourages them all to play slow-motion tag all over the front of the house, occasionally swiftly grabbing Darby and swinging him around to distract him, since he's really too young to have the patience to move in slow motion. With him continually distracted, Chloe, Max, and Sam can keep up the slow motion game without Darby's enthusiasm devolving the game into chaos.

Sam notices her watching and shoots Cat a grin. Cat lowers her face to her task of putting together a Melinda-approved snack of cheese, crackers, and carrot sticks to hide her own grin. It's *endearing* to see Sam actually having fun with kids. Even though she always claims not to like kids much, she's a natural with them, when she actually puts in the effort to engage with them.

"Snacks are ready!" Cat sings out, beginning to carry plates to the dining nook. The three kids immediately start hurrying over, and Sam follows them. She and Cat join them at the booth with their own plates of snacks.

Chloe frowns at Sam's plate. "How come you got so much more snacks than us?"

Indeed, Cat had piled Sam's plate of snacks high. "Because I can eat more than you," Sam replies, gnawing on a carrot stick.

"Wanna bet?" Max asks, a gleam in his eye.

"No eating contests," Cat frowns. Max doesn't appear to listen to her and keeps giving Sam a challenging look.

"Just eat your snack, kid," Sam waves him off.

Max seems to accept this and just shrugs, turning his attention back to his snack. This is another reason she likes having Sam around for babysitting: the kids actually listen when she lays down a rule or an order.

Sam winks at her across the table and Cat grins back.

They spend the afternoon with the kids, playing card games and drawing and watching some cartoons when the kids get tired in the mid-afternoon. Darby naps on the dining nook, which is a bonus. Just before Melinda comes to pick them up, they feed them chicken nuggets with macaroni and cheese. Cat likes to go with a crowd-pleaser whenever the parent okays it.

Melinda comes to pick them up before 5:30, apologizing for being late, while Sam says it's fine and tacks another \$20 onto her bill. Cat assures her that the kids behaved wonderfully, and she and Sam are paid in cash, with a bonus to cover the meal and snack they offered. It's always more than what the food actually costs, another reason why Sam always encourages feeding the kids. The more money they make sacrificing their own food, by Sam's logic, is more meat they can buy later.

After the kids are gone, Cat sinks down onto the couch. "Whew," she sighs. "I'm beat."

"I hope not too beat," Sam comments from behind her.

Cat cranes her neck to try to look behind her, over the back of the couch, without having to move her body much. "What? Why?"

"Cause I want to take you somewhere," Sam replies, a bit cryptically.

"Does it have to be tonight?" Cat asks. "I don't know if I feel like moving."

"You sound like me," Sam chuckles. She circles around to the front of the couch so she can see Cat better. "If you really, really want to stay home, we can," she says, though Cat can hear how reluctant she sounds. "But I'd also really, *really* like to take you somewhere special tonight. But only if you want to," she adds quickly.

Cat appreciates that she's being offered a choice, though she can tell Sam would be disappointed if she sat this one out. And when she considers that, she *is* curious. They've had a good day together so far, maybe there's room to invite more of that into their current connection, which has been a little strained. "Okay," she agrees, then holds out her hand. "Help me up."

Sam takes her hand and practically yanks her to her feet, forcing Cat to stumble into her. "Whoops," Sam laughs. "Forgot my own strength."

"I don't mind," Cat murmurs, wrapping her arms around her in a strong hug.

Sam chuckles and holds her close for a moment, then says, "Okay, much as I love this, we'd better get going. Melinda being late throws my schedule off a little."

Cat leans back to peer at Sam curiously. "You have a schedule?"



“Sure,” Sam smiles. “You ready to go?”

Cat gets her purse and puts on her jacket and joins Sam outside, where she climbs on the back of her motorcycle, and Sam begins to drive away.

It isn't really easy to grill Sam on where they're going while on a motorcycle, so Cat just hangs on and watches the route they're taking. She's still not sure quite what's going on until Sam pulls up and parks on the street in an area they've never really been to together. She looks around as Sam holds out a hand to help her off the motorcycle. “Come on,” she says, as Cat removes her helmet.

Cat sees the place just as she realizes Sam is leading her there. “Sam—are we going in *there*?” she asks in awe.

“Yep,” Sam answers. She looks at Cat a bit nervously as they stand in front of Ground Beans & Toe Beans. “Are you ready?”

Cat grabs Sam in a forceful hug, and overcome with excitement, just as quickly pushes right past her to hurry into the building.

“Wait!” Sam follows her, laughing.

A woman at a desk stops Cat before she can get very far, anyway. “Hello! Do you have an appointment?” she asks.

Cat isn't sure how to answer, and braces herself for disappointment if somehow it turns out Sam didn't know they needed one, either. But Sam is right behind her and answers quickly enough. “Yeah, uh, hold on, I have the appointment tickets right here.”

“Right,” the young woman replies, but there's a part of her that sounds a bit dubious as Sam takes out her wallet (Cat has a flash of quickly suppressed angst at the idea that it's the wallet *from Carly*) and extracts two tickets. She hands them over to the woman, looking triumphant.

“So you are...” The woman looks between them skeptically. “Sinjin Van Cleef and Courtney Van Cleef?”

“Those *are* their tickets,” Sam replies earnestly, “But they gave them to us. As a gift.”

“Mmhm.” The woman doesn't appear to believe Sam. Sam simply looks back at her guilelessly. “Okay, well, I'll just ask you to stay out here until your appointment slot officially begins. If they don't show up, we will let you in in their place.”

“I understand completely,” Sam replies very seriously, but when she turns away, she's rolling her eyes.

“Sam?” Cat asks as they stand in the little anteroom that separates the room with the *actual* kittens. “How did you end up with Sinjin's tickets?”

“Huh. Funny, I forgot to ask his name,” Sam remarks. “It's a long story. He had them, I wanted them, we made a fair trade.”

Cat knows there must be more to this story, but she doesn't press. Maybe Sam doesn't want to hash it out right in front of the woman who works here, who clearly doesn't trust her.

But when the window of time to show up for the appointment officially closes, they're asked to sign waivers, and then allowed in. They're instructed to take off their shoes, for the safety of the cats, and then they're given a short introduction by the same woman from the desk, who gives them rules, safety guidelines and advice on how to interact with the cats, and then, they're allowed to order their drinks and pet the cats.

"What do you want?" Sam asks, regarding her drink order.

Cat can barely think about that when she looks around at all the cats. "Surprise me!" she decides.

"You got it," Sam winks, heading over to the coffee bar.

Within moments, Cat has a cat napping in her lap and two kittens chasing a toy on a string that she shakes for them. Sam comes back holding two drinks a few minutes later and grins, watching her.

"Looks like you made some friends," she observes.

"Yeah!" Cat answers enthusiastically. "This is Bananas!" She strokes the head of the cat in her lap, who purrs and rubs the side of his face against her hand.

"It's pretty great, alright," Sam laughs.

"No, I mean, his name is *really* Bananas! You can see it on their little name tags!"

"Oh. Huh." Sam crouches down, still holding the drinks, to look at the kittens who are playing with Cat's toy. "Looks like these two are Benny and Sammy."

"Like you!" Cat exclaims.

"Yeah, except." Sam puts down one of the coffees and gently picks up the kitten who shares a variation on her name, lifting it enough to look under its tail. "Pretty sure he's a boy."

"Oh, you can tell?" Cat asks.

Sam sits down on the little loveseat next to her, putting their drinks carefully on the table next to her. "I think so," she says. "I used to have a cat."

"Really?" Cat asks.

"Frothy," Sam says affectionately.

"Wait, that sounds sort of familiar," Cat says.

"We probably mentioned him on our show," Sam replies. "He was...mostly feral, but he liked me. I found him when he was this drooling, spittle-covered mess because he'd eaten

something he shouldn't have. My mom refused to take him to the vet because she worried about the cost, but I took care of him, and after that, he wasn't afraid of me anymore."

"That's so sweet!" Cat gushes. In her lap, Bananas stretches and then hops down to investigate a water fountain. Another kitten has come over to investigate Cat's toy, and Sam scoops up kitten-Sammy and places him on the loveseat next to them, where he promptly curls up between them and immediately falls asleep.

"What about you?" Sam asks, gently stroking the sleeping kitten.

"My brother had a dog," Cat answers. "But...he's with my parents, and obviously I don't live with them anymore."

"Right," Sam responds. She holds out a hand to a different cat, a haughty-looking calico, but quickly the cat sniffs her and seems to decide she's alright, and rubs against Sam's hand.

"You're good with cats," Cat comments.

Sam shoots her a wink. "Well, you knew that already."

Cat giggles. "No, but I mean, I wasn't sure if cats would like you. Because..." She doesn't elaborate.

But Sam understands. "Guess they do. Never really thought about it when it came to Frothy." She nods to Cat. "Besides, you're not doing so badly, yourself."

Indeed, another cat has already come to claim Cat's lap, a little tuxedo kitten named Snorkel. "I guess not," Cat agrees. She sees Sam drinking from her coffee cup. "Can I have mine?" Sam passes her her coffee, and Cat takes a drink. "Mmm! What is it?"

"Just a caramel latte," Sam replies.

"It's *delicious*."

"Well, don't get too excited, because it's a half-caf. I know you don't do a ton of caffeine."

"It does make me a little crazy sometimes," Cat admits.

"I know," Sam smiles at her affectionately.

And just like earlier, when they were babysitting together, there's this sense of...*fitting*. She and Sam *fit* together. That's something that hasn't changed, at all. They know each other so well, and to Cat, it feels obvious that they *adore* each other, still.

She guesses it's a nice little reminder, that Sam still thinks she's special, will still *make* her feel special.

It's exactly what she wants from Sam, this reassurance, and though it felt forced to ask for it, she's glad she did. Because nothing about what Sam has offered her today feels forced.

Sam's phone buzzes, like someone is calling. Cat's heart sinks, but Sam just pulls her phone out and rejects the call, then slides it back into her pocket.

Cat's heart warms.

"This has been *great*," Cat gushes as they leave the space after their allotted hour with the cats is over. She sighs. "I wish we could take them all home with us."

"Maybe we can get a cat another time," Sam suggests.

"*Oooh*, can we?" Cat asks eagerly.

"I'm open to it," Sam replies. "Though maybe it should be, you know, when we're not babysitters anymore. Cats and strange kids might not mix."

"They mix fine with *me*," Cat mumbles.

"You know what I mean," Sam laughs.

"Thank you for this," Cat sighs, slipping her hand into Sam's.

Sam smiles at her. "Well..." she says slowly. "The evening isn't *quite* over. If you don't want it to be."

Cat perks up. "There's *more*?"

Sam laughs. "It's just another little idea I have. We don't have to do it today, though."

Cat *was* tired earlier, but probably her latte helped, because she is fully awake now. "Where are we going?"

Sam grins and straddles her motorcycle, offering her hand to invite Cat to join her.

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This next destination is close by. Sam had scoped it out the day before, and drives the handful of blocks toward it. It's a little weird to be in this neighborhood. They're in Westwood, not far from UCLA, and therefore not far from where Carly lives. It's strange to consider how close they currently are, and how they're not currently about to see each other.

But it's also odd, but welcome, to realize that Sam hasn't really been thinking about Carly that much, maybe wouldn't be thinking about her at all if not for where they happen to be in the city, because she's so enjoying being focused on her day out with Cat.

The sun is starting to go down when they pull into the parking area, and at first, their destination doesn't look like much. Just a fence and an expanse of grass. Cat looks around curiously when her helmet comes off. "Are we at a park?" she asks.

"A *special* park," Sam replies. She sniffs the air and gazes off toward where they're going. It's less busy than it was when she checked it out yesterday, maybe because it's starting to get

dark.

“How special?” Cat asks, skipping closer to join Sam.

“It’s a dog park,” Sam reveals, trying not to sound disappointed.

But Cat gasps with excitement, then seems crestfallen. “But we’re not dogs!”

Sam laughs. “I know, but there’s no rule that says we can’t go in and pet the dogs!”

Cat brightens again. “We can?”

“Sure, why not? We can just ask the owners if it’s okay.”

“This is the best date ever!” Cat cries. Sam slips her hand into Cat’s as they walk together over to the fenced-in area where the dogs roam.

It’s a pretty big dog park. At least, Sam thinks it is, it’s not like she’s an expert on them. Looking around, she can see why it would be fun for the dogs: it’s grass and dirt, not all concrete, there are little pretend fire hydrants and hurdles and beams for the dogs to pee on or jump over or climb on. Yeah, Sam gets it.

The presence (or lingering scent) of so many dogs in a small area is a lot for Sam’s nose to take in. It was similar, being in a room full of so many cats, but there is something different about the way even neutered dogs use urine to communicate that makes this different. Sam doesn’t exactly speak the same “language”, but she can tell there’s something being expressed. The cats, aside from their litter boxes, smelled like warmth and adventure, barely contained. The dog park smells like a cacophony of excitement, or at least, that’s the best way Sam can think of to describe it.

As they enter the park, they’re almost immediately greeted by an overjoyed-looking pitbull mix of some kind. Sam glances over to see the owner watching them. “Can we pet your dog?” she asks.

He nods, and Cat takes the lead, holding out her hand to the dog, whose tail is wagging so hard the whole rear is shaking. Within moments, they have the attention of three other dogs, who all seem to make a beeline for Sam. She steps back cautiously as they sprint toward her, owners trailing in their wake, and she and Cat make sure it’s okay to pet all the dogs before Sam offers her own hand.

She’s rewarded with licks and jumps and enthusiastic whines as she administers scratches behind the ears and praise. Cat quickly follows her lead, drawing their attention to her.

She and Cat don’t spend a ton of time there, because it is getting dark and the owners are gradually leaving, but they do get to pet a lot of happy dogs, and they even lightly pretend to chase a few, but they leave most of the actual playing to the dogs themselves.

Laughing, they head back toward Sam’s motorcycle. Sam idly wipes her hands on her jeans, knowing she’s covered in dog saliva.

“This was *so great!*” Cat gushes.

Sam grins at her. “I had a blast with you,” she agrees. She pulls out her phone, wanting to check the map for traffic before she starts home, but now that she’s looking at it, she sees she has a *lot* of notifications. “Holy shit.”

“What?” Cat asks.

“Uh, Jade called me like thirty times. And left a bunch of messages. And texted me a lot.”

“How did you miss that?” Cat wonders.

“I totally silenced my phone earlier, no buzzing or anything. Didn’t want to get kicked out of the cat cafe. I forgot I’d done it until right now.”

“I hope nothing is wrong.” Cat sounds worried.

Sam doesn’t blame her. She has a sinking feeling in her stomach that something might’ve happened to Tori. The most recent texts from Jade say, “ANSWER ME,” and she doesn’t even look further back before she calls Jade back.

Jade answers as the first ring barely finishes. “What is *wrong* with you?” she shouts.

Sam doesn’t even have to put her on speaker phone; it’s clear that Cat heard that perfectly. “What’s wrong?” Sam asks.

“You gave my number to *Sinjin*?!” Jade screams.

Cat gasps. Sam frowns. “I did not,” she refutes.

“Well, he *called me* and said you *did*, so then *what the hell happened!*?”

“I gave him *most* of your number,” Sam admits. “I switched the last digit.”

“*Why would you even give him most of it?!*” Jade shrieks.

“It was important!” Sam yells back. She can see some dawning comprehension on Cat’s face and she looks regretful. But Sam holds her ground. “Look, I *tried* not to actually give it to him. I did my best but he had me cornered!”

“You had better have a *really good* explanation for this or I will make you very, *very* sorry,” Jade growls.

Sam understands, intellectually, why Jade scares people. It’s just that Jade has never scared her, and now is no exception. “I’ll tell you later. Look, I don’t see what the big deal is. Just block him.”

“You think I didn’t do that *immediately*?? That’s not the point! Do you not know what nerds can *do* with phone numbers?”

“I’ll be sure to ask Freddie,” Sam answers dryly. Nonetheless, she *does* feel a bit bad about this, especially since she hadn’t even given Jade a warning. She thought she’d thrown Sinjin off the scent enough. For the sake of her friendship with Jade, she’s willing to do something she rarely does. “I’m sorry. I would’ve warned you but I didn’t think he’d figure out your number from the wrong one I gave him.”

“You’d *better be!*” Jade snarls, and then the line goes dead.

Sam looks at Cat. Cat is wide-eyed. “You really gave him Jade’s number?” she asks warily.

“I only had time to change the last digit. He must’ve realized it,” Sam sighs.

“Sinjin is a lot of things, but he’s not an idiot,” Cat says. Sam winces, because even if she doesn’t mean it, it *feels* like Cat is calling *her* one. Cat tilts her head to the side. “He’s also not that bad a guy. I’m a little surprised Jade is freaking out about this.”

“She’ll be fine,” Sam says, though she’s mostly saying it to reassure herself. Add Jade to the list of people who are frustrated with her this week, she guesses. She’s sure she can find a way to piss off Tori by Tuesday and have her whole circle mad at her.

But right now...Cat doesn’t seem to be frustrated with her at all. In fact, she’s smiling at her, slowly, softly. “You risked Jade getting mad at you for me?”

Sam blinks. She hadn’t thought of it that way, but... “Guess I did,” she shrugs.

Cat kisses her, right there in the parking lot in front of a horrified-seeming woman trying to pull her giant German Shepherd away from them as it strains to get closer.

All in all, Sam thinks this date could not have gone better.

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Things are okay for the next couple of days. Sam goes to see Carly on Sunday night, and Cat has just gotten into bed by the time Sam makes it home. Earlier that week, Cat might’ve been pissed at her for this, but she’s still riding high from the unexpected and sweet date that Sam took her on the day before. Besides, Sam apologizes, explains that they lost track of time watching a movie that happened to be on TV, and Cat decides she can forgive that.

It’s the middle of the semester, though, and things are starting to ramp up in intensity. Midterms, papers, projects: Cat has a lot of these coming up in the next few weeks and she’s already spending too much time trying to figure out how to properly budget her time so she’s not overwhelmed. She almost envies Sam’s schedule; she has a few art projects due, which at least sounds more interesting than a paper about *Death of a Salesman* or a test on colonialism in Africa.

That’s not to say that Sam’s school work is *easier*, per se. Cat knows that Sam basically puts in work on her art projects almost every single day—well, unless she goes to Carly’s, Cat supposes. But also given that she’s *Sam*, she’s only really concerned about completing the work that interests her. If she has to read something boring, or write a paper, or do any sort of

project she's not thrilled about, she just...won't. As she's stated many times, Sam isn't here for the grades or the credits. She's here to improve her art skills and, if she decides that the deadlines the school gives her are challenges she *wants* to accept, she'll follow them. So Sam's schoolwork *seems* easier to Cat, because she enjoys it a little more, and only does what she wants of it.

Cat wishes she didn't have to care about grades or credits.

Sam ends up going to see Carly that Wednesday night, which is ultimately okay with Cat because she ends up spending the evening doing research for a group project she has coming up. Sam doesn't stay as late as she did last time, so they even have time to relax and watch a little TV together before turning in to bed.

Saturday is the next day Sam goes to see Carly, after they babysit for a few hours in the late morning and early afternoon. It's earlier than she usually leaves to see Carly; Cat kind of gathers that maybe they're actually going to do something other than have sex in Carly's apartment for hours this time. She *wants* to feel happy for them and...she does, kind of.

But because it's Saturday, Cat really doesn't want to do homework, and staying home alone doesn't sound at all appealing. So she calls Robbie to see what he's up to, and ends up spending the afternoon with Beck and Robbie, visiting different thrift stores and finding clothes in Robbie's size (Robbie has decided that he needs a "new look" but he also doesn't want to pay retail price for it). Eventually, they just start having fun with it, she and Beck pick out ridiculous options for Robbie to model for them, and one thrift store ends up kicking them out when it becomes obvious they're trying on clothes for their own amusement with no intention of buying them.

In the end, Robbie ends up with a denim jacket, a long-sleeved henley shirt, and a pair of dark slacks. None of them are exactly a fashion *leap* for him, but Cat is happy that he seems to like them.

"Twelve dollars!" Robbie crows, swinging his bag excitedly. "You can't get a deal like *that* at the Northridge Mall."

Beck rolls his eyes, but smiles fondly.

Sam comes home just past dinner time, and Cat is both relieved to have some time with her and disappointed that all they really do with it is hang out like they normally do.

Luckily, Sam has a plan to make up for that the next day: after breakfast, she tells Cat she wants to take her out someplace. Cat has homework—she's starting to have a *lot* of it—but she figures they can spend a few hours having fun before she needs to buckle down.

Sam takes her to the Santa Monica Pier. At first, Cat isn't all that impressed; she's been here plenty of times, but then, Sam shows her real intentions.

"Here we are!" she gestures at the arcade on the boardwalk with a flourish.

"The arcade?" Cat asks, a little doubtfully.



Sam nods. “The arcade! And today, we’re going to rescue that stuffed kitten you’ve had your eye on for the longest time!”

Cat grins excitedly, but then considers what Sam is suggesting. “But that’s going to take a lot of time and money!”

“I brought a fun budget with me,” Sam explains. “We can safely spend all of it if we have to. And I’m determined to keep playing today until we do this!”

Cat appreciates Sam’s determination and commitment. “Normally I’d be down to do this all day, but...I do have homework,” she says regretfully.

Sam glances at her watch. “Well, how long would you say we have?”

Cat considers, also taking into account that she’ll likely be making dinner later; if they’re spending their fun budget at the arcade, they probably can’t order food instead. “Two and a half hours?” she suggests.

Sam narrows her eyes thoughtfully, then nods seriously. “Two and a half hours it is,” she says solemnly.

It turns out that two and a half hours goes fast. And eats up a lot of money. Cat has a few favorite games and skips between them, but it turns out Sam is an absolute killer at skee-ball, and once she finds her rhythm again, spends almost the entire time sinking one hundred point shot after one hundred point shot. She even draws a small crowd at one point. But it turns out, even with Sam’s skill, they don’t quite make enough tickets to get the stuffed animal Cat wants.

“How is this not enough?” Sam complains, holding a giant wad of tickets that she’s still folding up evenly.

Cat has her own, more modest, stack of tickets, but even combined, they’re short. “I’m sorry,” she sighs. “Maybe if we had longer...”

“It’s fine.” Sam wiggles her arm. “My skee-ball arm was starting to get tired.” She shakes her head as she squints skeptically at the prize wall. “I should’ve known. It took Spencer all day to win an arcade prize one time. Like, *all* day.” Cat isn’t sure what to say to that, but Sam smiles at her. “Do you want to get something else, or keep saving up for the cat?”

“We should save up,” Cat decides. “But maybe...” She eyes the cheaper prizes.

She ends up choosing some candy for a prize, so at least they don’t walk out empty-handed (not that they really *do*, with the wads of tickets in Sam’s pockets and in Cat’s purse). They share the snack as they walk back to Sam’s motorcycle.

“Well,” Sam says as they leave the pier. “Sorry we didn’t get your stuffed animal today.”

“It’s okay.” Cat leans against her, their arms linked. “I still had fun with you.”

Sam smiles at her.

That smile holds Cat over as she spends basically the rest of the evening working on a paper for school.

It's a boring and frustrating end to a good weekend, and an omen for the week to come. Because this week is...not easy.

But Cat does her best to keep her head up. She got through last semester, she feels certain she can get through this one. Especially since this semester, she gets to take a few classes she's actually *excited* about. But maybe that's part of the problem. These are much more interesting classes, but they require more work, and Cat is starting to worry she's going to get overwhelmed.

All in all, it's an exhausting week, and honestly, she can't even really worry much about when Sam goes to see Carly, except to be jealous that she somehow has the free time to do it. Cat certainly doesn't.

When the weekend comes, Cat is ready for a break, and to actually do something *fun*. She wonders what Sam has in store for them this week.

Except it turns out...nothing. They spend most of Saturday relaxing at home.

Cat guesses it's fine. She could use a day to relax and not have to go anywhere or do anything. Maybe Sam sensed that.

She tries not to notice how much Sam is on her phone as they watch TV. But at least when she reaches for her hand, or leans over to offer her a kiss, Sam is responsive.

It's all Cat really has the energy for, anyway.

On Sunday, they babysit, and then Sam goes to visit Carly. Again, Cat can't be that upset about it, or so she tells herself. She's too busy.

But it's starting to irritate her how often Sam is going to visit Carly. A couple of times a week *seems* fair, when Cat thinks about it, but when she has been spending basically all her free time working on homework, it's *annoying* that Sam has time to go and have crazy sex or whatever while Cat sits at home, alone, and struggles with homework.

Actually, that's not entirely fair. She's known for a long time that Sam's school priorities are different, it's not that surprising for Sam to have free time like this. What annoys her *more* is that *Carly* somehow has the free time to spend with Sam when *she* doesn't. Carly takes her studies seriously the way Cat does, and it's *not fair* that Carly isn't absolutely *swamped* in school work right now, it's not *fair* that even though Cat lives with Sam and sees her every day it's not like she has time to *enjoy* being with Sam. They eat, they go to school, they sit at home and work on separate things. If she's lucky, she has time to watch some mindless reality show cuddled up next to Sam on the couch before it's time to go to sleep and do it all over again the next day. They haven't even had time for sex for *weeks*.

Cat gets distracted a few times that evening fuming about this discrepancy, but eventually, she's able to focus on the group project that is the majority of her work that night. She's so

absorbed in it that she almost forgets to eat dinner, and it's late by the time she realizes how hungry she is.

When she gets up to make herself a quick sandwich, it finally dawns on her *how* she forgot to eat dinner: she'd expected Sam to be home by now, and Sam coming home was her mental marker to help make sure she ate dinner.

In fact, she expected Sam home *hours* ago.

She stares at her phone, wondering if she should call Sam, but...what's the point? It's not like there's any reason for Sam to come home if all Cat is doing is homework.

She eats her sandwich and gets back to work.

She's in bed by the time Sam comes home, and at this point, has had enough time to be mad about how late she is.

She hasn't fallen asleep, which is how she hears Sam come in through the back door. She waits, quietly lying in bed, until Sam gently pushes open the bedroom door.

"Cat?" she says quietly. "Are you asleep?"

Cat strongly considers pretending she is. But she has a feeling that Sam can tell that she isn't, anyway, so she answers flatly. "No, I'm awake."

"I'm sorry," Sam says quietly. "I didn't mean to come home so late. I fell asleep."

Somehow, this makes Cat feel even worse. There's the thought of Sam, curled up to sleep with Carly—a privilege only Cat had, until tonight. And there's the utter *ridiculousness* of making her come home just to sleep with Cat, something they won't even remember, because they'll be *asleep*. Suddenly, what seemed so important almost a month ago seems silly now. Who cares where Sam sleeps? It's not like Cat is offering her anything more interesting. Maybe Cat should just stop trying to compete with Carly, who's obviously more exciting, and obviously *smarter*, if she has the time to spend with Sam while she also manages school work.

But just the mere *thought* of that makes Cat angry with *herself*. She *loves* Sam. She'd sooner die than just let someone else have her.

Though that also means she doesn't want to let on to Sam how upset she is by this whole situation, so she *can* keep her.

"It's okay," she manages to respond in an even voice. "Just come get in bed with me. I missed you."

That part isn't untrue. Cat *does* miss Sam. It's hard to feel like she lives with someone she never spends any time with.

At least she sleeps well, once Sam gets into bed with her. It's a good thing, too, because she needs it.

Just like last week, this week isn't looking up, especially when it starts out with a gut punch: the paper that Cat worked hard on receives a poor grade. Apparently, in her haste to finish it on top of juggling all her other studies, she misunderstood the assignment.

Her professor is understanding, however, and offers her a chance to re-write, since the issue wasn't with the quality of her paper, but with the topic and execution. She'd clearly worked hard on it, the professor notes, and she deserves the chance to try again. Cat jumps at the chance, but it's discouraging to realize she has to start the whole assignment from scratch.

This throws off Cat's entire plan for strategizing and plotting how to prioritize her assignments to make sure she has time for everything. She has two tests this week and another paper due next week, not to mention a monologue she's still learning and a song she's supposed to be writing, both due within a week. Cat's success in school relies on being able to plan and schedule and organize, and she feels overwhelmed when she meets up with Sam at the end of their school day.

"I don't know how I'm going to manage this," she begins, babbling to Sam about everything she has on her plate and her worries about it all working out.

She can tell from the frown lines on Sam's forehead that she's having a bit of trouble following what Cat is talking about, but when they get to Nona's car, she stops Cat's babbling with a hug.

Cat is surprised, but welcomes the hug, falling silent as she presses her face against Sam's shoulder.

"Hey," Sam murmurs, "You'll be alright."

"I don't *feel* alright," Cat mumbles.

Sam pulls back, hands still on Cat's shoulders, and smiles at her. "I believe in you," she says. "When you wanna do something, you *do* it. So I know you'll get this done, too."

Cat wants to cry, because it's not that she doesn't have the *desire* or *drive* to do this. It's because she literally feels like she doesn't have *time* to finish anything. But she doesn't know how to explain that, so she just drops her gaze and lets herself fall into Sam for another strong hug.

It sucks to feel like Sam doesn't understand. Especially when, for so long, Sam felt like the only person who ever *did* understand her.

Cat goes home and works on homework. She sees Sam across the room working on an art project for a little while, but eventually, she switches to TV, and then comes the inevitable. "What's for dinner?"

Cat doesn't mind making dinner. She can be certain it will turn out better than anything Sam can do in the kitchen. And sharing food is, for Cat, an expression of love, something she learned from Nona.

But hearing this question from Sam, when it breaks her out of the zone of studying for her test, makes her blood boil.

“You can have a can of ham if you’re hungry now,” Cat replies testily. “I’ll make a couple of sandwiches in an hour or so.”

Sam doesn’t reply to this but, maybe sensing that she’s distracting Cat, she turns off the TV.

But somehow, her sitting in silence across the room is enough to draw Cat’s attention, and she watches the way Sam grins at her phone, obviously texting Carly.

Cat would prefer the distraction of the TV, to be honest.

The stress and anxiety of everything keeps Cat awake that night, and she struggles to keep a cheerful disposition at school the next day. It feels like her default optimism is cracking and falling apart around her. It makes her feel like someone else, someone she doesn’t care to get to know very well.

Her only solace is that by the beginning of next week, she’ll have a bit of a reprieve from big projects, at least until the end of the semester. She’ll be able to breathe again.

That evening, as she and Sam walk into the apartment, Cat doesn’t realize right away that Sam has asked her a question, because she’s already thinking about how to prioritize her homework. “What?” she asks, distracted.

“Just wondering what your plans are for tonight,” Sam says, sounding casual.

Well, what in the hell does Sam *think* her plans are? “Homework. Homework. And more homework,” Cat answers darkly.

“Then I was thinking, maybe I could get out of your hair for a little while,” Sam offers, sounding perfectly reasonable.

Cat’s emotions are a messy clash of relief that she’ll have peace and a selfish, stubborn impulse to not let Sam out of her sight. She quickly hones in on what Sam is suggesting. “You’re going to go see Carly, aren’t you?” she asks, barely suppressing a sneer.

Sam’s shoulders sink. She looks away. “Well, yeah,” she admits.

“Then why didn’t you just say so?”

“Why do you have to make it so hard to even *talk* about?” Sam shoots back.

“You don’t have to pretend you’re doing me any *favours* by going to see her,” Cat volleys right back at Sam.

“But I honestly thought it might do us *all* some good!”

“Yeah, you’re all about making everyone happy, aren’t you?” Cat snaps.

Sam looks hurt and bewildered. “What are you so *mad* about?”

“Maybe I’m tired of playing second fiddle to Carly!” Cat shouts. She has just a moment to appreciate the mental image of her and Carly playing violins and glaring at each other, but she’s too upset to even indulge in anything humorous right now.

“But you’re *not*,” Sam says, exasperated. “How many times do I have to tell you both that I *love* you both, and just because you play different roles in my life right now it doesn’t mean —”

Cat isn’t interested in letting her finish. “You know what? Just go.”

Sam doesn’t move. Doesn’t even blink. “What do you mean?” she asks coldly.

“It’s not like we’ve even had a single fun time together lately. I’m just a drag, you’re never excited to see me anymore, you don’t even care about making it home in time for bed. If you’d rather just go be with Carly, then just go freaking be with Carly! I don’t even care anymore. I don’t have the energy to fight to keep you and it’s not like you even want to be kept!”

Cat doesn’t even know where *half* of this came from, but it feels like the truest thing she’s ever said as soon as it’s out of her mouth. She glares at Sam, whose expression changes from shock to hurt to cold fury in a couple of quick heartbeats that Cat can feel vibrating in her chest.

“You know what? Fine! I’m leaving,” Sam snarls. She grabs her red checkered backpack, the one she takes to school everyday, and unceremoniously dumps all her school books and papers onto the floor by the front closet. Then she stomps back to the bedroom. Cat follows her, curious and also so she can keep glaring at her, and watches as Sam shoves a few random articles of clothes into her bag, slips into the bathroom to grab a toothbrush, and zips her bag up so hard she almost breaks the zipper.

“I guess you’re not planning to do any *homework* with Carly,” Cat says scathingly.

“I’m not going to school tomorrow. Fuck school. And I’m not coming back,” Sam tells her, meeting her eyes. Sam’s eyes are like ice chips and the hottest flames: intense, fathomless, and *cruel*.

“Good!” Cat shouts recklessly. “Because I don’t want to see you again, anyway!”

“Well, *good*!” Sam returns fire. “Because you *won’t*!” She pushes her way out the back door and slams it so hard there’s a splinter in the wood frame and a crack in one of the glass panes.

“It’s not like I’ll even miss you!” Cat screams after her, voice cracking and wavering.

Moments later, the sound of a motorcycle engine fills Cat’s skull, and then disappears, more quickly than seems possible.

Cat stands alone in the middle of the living room, hands balled into fists so tight her nails dig into her palms, breathing hard, teeth clenched together.

It takes about five seconds before she starts to bawl.

She sinks onto the floor, crying into her hands, lying in a heap. She can't even fully process her thoughts. She keeps imagining Sam's hand on her shoulder, that Sam has come back, is about to gather her up in her arms and hold her, comfort her, tell her everything will be alright, that she'll *always* choose her.

But it's clearer than ever that she *won't*.

Eventually, Cat gathers herself up, and pushes herself into her homework.

School isn't going to stop just because she feels like her entire life has.

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It takes Sam a few blocks to slow down. She's driving fast, weaving in and out of traffic, heart pounding in her ears, all her senses attuned to the road, intent on reaching Carly as soon as possible. But, although driving at this speed feels perfectly safe to *her*, with her powerful senses and state of focused flow, she knows that she looks reckless as hell to bystanders, and the last thing she needs is to be pulled over. As angry as she is, there's a very high chance of her fighting a cop and ending up in *actual* jail. She's not a juvenile anymore.

Or she could end up dead, she supposes. She trusts a cop's judgment even less than her own, even in this state.

So she slows down, moves more cautiously and courteously through traffic as she follows the roads to Carly's apartment, despite the pounding of blood in her ears and the heat of fury surging through her limbs.

When she pulls up, she realizes she hadn't even let Carly know that she is coming over. They'd been talking about the possibility, but Sam had left in such a hurry that there'd been no resolution to the conversation. She takes off her helmet and immediately calls Carly.

"Sam?" Carly greets, sounding a little confused.

"Hey," Sam answers. "I'm here, come let me in."

"You're here?" She sounds surprised, excited. "Oh! Oh, okay, I'll be right down!"

Sam walks over to wait next to the front door for Carly. She can see her coming through the glass, see the smile that flashes over her face as soon as she sees Sam.

Carly opens the door and grins fully. "Hey!" she says happily. Sam can almost smell her curiosity, though, and notes the way her brow tightens slightly as she notices that Sam is carrying her bag.

Sam smiles back, knowing it's a little weak. "Hey."

"Come on up," Carly says unnecessarily, and they start through the courtyard and staircases to Carly's apartment.

They don't say much as they walk to her apartment. Carly walks a little ahead of Sam and smiles over her shoulder a lot, but that's not unusual. Everything *seems* normal, except the fact that it also feels completely surreal to Sam.

Cat told her to leave and she did.

She never thought *either* of those things would happen.

But Carly isn't oblivious, not that Sam ever thought she was. Okay, she maybe thought she was back when she had what felt like an obvious crush on her, and maybe she was a little bit right about that, but Carly's too smart and knows Sam too well to ignore her obvious emotional turmoil. Once they're safely inside Carly's apartment, Carly immediately asks, "Is there a reason you brought your bag?"

"Yeah." Sam lets it fall next to her with a pointed *thump*. "Cat kicked me out."

Carly freezes, so completely that it's almost like a prey response, utterly stiff and still. "She *what*?" she finally asks.

"Or, well. I guess I left? I don't know. It was sort of mutual."

"You—she—you guys broke up?" Carly asks in a small voice.

Sam's stomach twists at the question, and she feels a sensation like a hard prod to her sternum. She shrugs and swallows hard. "Guess so," she manages.

"Oh, Sam," Carly says in a broken voice.

Sam doesn't want to talk about this. She doesn't want to be upset. She just wants to spend some time with Carly, have a good time, and just *forget* about the ugly fight she had with Cat. If she pretends it didn't happen, maybe it can't hurt her.

Because so far, she just feels so *numb*, that hurt hasn't even really set in yet. And Sam doesn't want to know how it's going to feel when it does. She knows what it's like. She remembers *running*, essentially, just putting miles between herself and Seattle in the wake of her breakup with Carly, trying to make the hurt more manageable by just being someplace else, *someone* else, and how sometimes she couldn't quite unrun it, and she'd cry herself to sleep on some cheap motel bed, or on some rest stop bench, or wherever else she could find to lie down for a while.

Sometimes *that* doesn't feel real either, sometimes she doesn't know how she survived it, and she *definitely* doesn't want to repeat it.

So she grabs Carly, forcefully, and kisses her. It's messy, all the anger Sam holds pouring out, and Carly wriggles away, literally putting Sam at arm's length. "What are you doing?"

"Figured we might as well enjoy our time together," Sam says dully.

"Sam, I didn't enjoy that kiss, and I can't imagine you did, either," Carly says plainly.



“I can try again,” Sam says quickly. Carly is shaking her head, still looking at her. “Well, I don’t know what you want me to do,” Sam grumbles.

“I want you to *talk to me*,” Carly says.

“I don’t want to talk.”

“Come on. Sit,” Carly instructs. It makes Sam angry again, but, just as always, she doesn’t know how to say no to Carly. She glowers, but she sits on the couch, glaring at Carly, who stands watching her compassionately for a moment before sitting down next to her. “Tell me what happened,” she says softly.

“I *told* you, I *left*.”

“No, I mean. Talk it through. *Why* did you leave?”

Sam sighs heavily, furious now, and runs a hand through her hair. She came here to *escape* all this. “Fine. I said I maybe wanted to come see you and Cat absolutely flipped the *fuck* out and told me to just come here and stay here.”

“Why was she so upset?” Carly asks, sounding concerned.

“How the fuck should *I* know?!” Sam shouts.

“What did she *say*?”

“Why do you *care*?”

“Because I care about *you*!”

“Then let me deal with this *my* way!”

“By just *ignoring* it?”

“For fucks sake, Carly, I didn’t come here for another fight!”

“I’m not trying to fight with you! I just want you to *talk to me*!”

“I don’t *want to*—” But Sam’s voice catches in her throat and she realizes how close she is to just crying with frustration. She takes a deep, steadying breath, to hold the tears at bay, and it calms her, just a tiny bit. Just enough to realize that she can at least avoid this fight if she just fucking does what Carly wants. The way she always does.

She burns with resentment a little bit, but then thinks back, trying to remember what Cat said. “I don’t know,” she grumbles, then reluctantly says. “She said something about...something about how we weren’t having any fun anymore anyway so I might as well just go be with you instead.”

Carly doesn’t speak for a moment, maybe waiting to see if Sam is going to relay more, and then she asks, “Is that *true*?”

“No!” Sam denies reflexively, but then amends, “I mean, she’s been *really* busy with school. We both have lately, but her even more so than me. But like, I know she wants to feel special, and for us to do fun things together, so like a few weeks ago I took her to this cat cafe and a dog park, and then like weekend before last we went to the arcade at the pier and I tried to win this stuffed animal for her. I’m trying to make sure she knows how much I love her!”

“What about this past weekend?” Carly asks.

Sam shrugs. “We just kinda hung out.” At Carly’s pitying look, Sam rolls her eyes. “She said it didn’t need to be, like, a regular thing! And she was so busy I thought we should just take it easy!”

“Did she want to take it easy?”

“She didn’t seem to have a problem with it,” Sam says roughly.

Carly nods, still watching Sam with compassionate eyes. “Then what happened?”

“I…” Sam rubs her face. “I don’t know. I packed a bag and I left.”

“That’s it?”

Sam spreads her hands, gesturing wildly. “What else is there supposed to be?”

“It just doesn’t make sense for you two to just…break up, just like that.”

“Why do you care? Now you have me all to yourself.” Sam moves a little closer on the couch. “We can sleep together, just like you wanted.”

But Carly moves back, putting space between them, shakes her head. “I want you, Sam. But not like this.”

“What do you mean *not like this*? I’m the same as I’ve always been.”

“You’re *not*. You’re *devastated*, and I don’t know if you just don’t even *know* you are, or if you’re *pretending* not to know.”

Sam’s throat tightens. She looks away. She *doesn’t want this*. She doesn’t understand why Carly isn’t letting her just move past this.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Carly says tentatively, “But you need to go back to Cat.”

“What part of ‘she kicked me out’ don’t you *get*!?” Sam says angrily. “I can’t go back!”

“You had a *fight*,” Carly says emphatically. “But that doesn’t mean it’s over. You and I had fights, both as friends and as more than friends, and each time it almost ruined *everything* because we were both too *fucking stubborn*. I’m not letting you ruin what you have with Cat, because it makes you *happy*.”

“What if I don’t make *her* happy?” Sam says sourly.

“I don’t believe that, either,” Carly insists. She stares at Sam, looking...*disappointed*. “Why did you leave her?”

“I *told* you! She *told* me to! I was just giving her what she wanted!”

“Do you *really* think that’s what she wants?” Carly challenges.

For the first time, Sam really considers this. The answer is obvious. Of *course* Cat wouldn’t want this. But Sam had been too hurt, too angry, too focused on Carly, to even consider how hurt Cat must’ve been. She puts her head in her hands. “I don’t know *what* she wants,” she whispers.

“Look, I know I don’t know Cat as well as you do. But I know *you*. And I know how self-centered and *annoying* you can be.”

That stings. Sam glares at her. She’s been called annoying by Carly for almost her entire life, that part is basically a term of endearment. But to be called self-centered by the person whose happiness Sam practically *dedicated* herself to throughout most of their middle and high school years...*that* hurts.

But Carly just continues, “And if she’s been busy with school—which, who *isn’t* right now?--Cat’s probably stressed out, and that’s making her feel more jealous of the time we have together, especially if she feels like she’s not getting any quality time with you, herself. I’m not saying it’s your *fault*, but she’s probably hurt you two didn’t do anything special last weekend.”

“She *said*—” Sam starts heatedly.

“I *know* what she said, but sometimes what people say they need and what they *realize* they need are two different things. Like...” Carly looks down. “I thought I wanted you for myself. But maybe I’m realizing that you need Cat to be okay, and I need you to be okay so that *we* can be okay.”

Sam wants to refute that she can be okay without Cat. But as furious as she is right now, she can’t even make herself say the words.

“Do you still love her?” Carly asks abruptly.

What a stupid question. Sam just nods dumbly, staring at the ground, the tug of regret in her guts as she realizes just how little she told Cat that lately, how poorly she *showed* her that, today.

“And didn’t you promise her you’d always be home with her, every night?” Carly prompts.

Sam nods again, and the word *promise* feels like it’s resounding in her head. Sam Puckett doesn’t break promises. And right now, she’s breaking *two* promises she made to Cat.

She’d promised Cat Valentine that she’d always choose her, and she’d tossed her aside over one petty little fight during a stressful couple of weeks.

“Fuck,” Sam mutters.

“Go back to your apartment,” Carly orders her.

“I—but I...I *do* want to see you,” Sam falters.

Carly smiles. “Me, too. But, I have homework. And, no offense, but you’re not very fun right now. And you and I get to do the fun stuff together at this point in our relationship. That’s the trade-off we agreed to.”

Sam shakes her head. “No. You don’t get it. We’re *more* than just fun stuff. I—”

“It was a joke, Sam.”

“No, but.” Sam tries to gather her thoughts. “I need you to know that I *want* us to be more than that. I *want* you two to *feel* like equal partners. I just...don’t know how yet.”

“I know,” Carly smiles, a little wistfully. “But, I think if you’re crying in front of me, and bringing me your troubles from your *other* relationship, then we’re pretty serious.”

“I’m *not* crying.”

“Aren’t you?” Carly challenges playfully.

But Sam isn’t crying, she’s smiling. Carly has always been good at making her feel better. Still. “I should go.” She picks up her backpack.

“I know.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Carly kisses her, a gentle kiss. “Sam?”

“What?”

“Listen to her. And be honest with her.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know how to have a girlfriend, you know. That’s why I have two.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re any good at it.”

“Wow. Harsh.”

“But accurate.”

Sam gives her one final kiss, and guesses she’ll let Carly win that one.

Because she isn’t wrong.

Sam only hopes that she will still actually have two girlfriends when she goes back to her apartment.

-

The only reason Cat hasn't broken down completely is because she can't afford to.

She's sitting at the dining nook, has been since Sam left, just focusing all her attention on school. If she really, really tries, she won't think about what just happened. She's already cried about it and she can't afford to spend more time crying, so every time it crosses her mind, she cuts herself off after the first flicker of pain, her breath hitches in a stifled sob, and she forces herself to stare at her schoolwork until her eyes glaze over.

It's only sort of working, but it's the best Cat can do right now.

She doesn't know how long she works, but it's long enough that she considers turning on the TV because it's just *too* quiet in the apartment. But turning on the TV would signify just how much she misses Sam, and she doesn't have the luxury of even *thinking* that right now.

So Cat sits in silence and works.

She hears the sound of a motor, much like Sam's motorcycle, outside the apartment. It makes her breath hitch and she closes her eyes for just a moment as the image of Sam taking off her helmet and shaking out her blonde curls flashes through her mind, but then she forces herself to ignore the sound.

Moments later, though, there's a knock at the door. Cat groans. It's probably Dice. "It's open!" she yells.

There's no response, and then, another knock. Cat frowns. Did she forget about a babysitting charge today? That would be really, *really* bad. "Be right there!" she calls, getting up from the dining nook to answer the door.

When she opens the door, Sam is standing there.

Cat's mouth drops open and she lets out a little shriek and slams the door, but then immediately opens it again and stares at her. "Sam?" she asks, her voice small. It feels almost *more* surreal to have Sam knock on the front door than it had to have Sam *leave*.

"Yeah. Hey," Sam replies in a subdued voice. Her face is slack, like she's too tired to even have any expression at all. Her shoulders are slumped, her head is low. She looks *small* in a way that she almost *never* does. Cat knows that she and Sam are basically the same height, but Sam always seems taller to her, and not just because she often wears boots with a bit of a heel. It has to do with her *presence*, her confidence, the fact that she's not afraid of anything.

But, Cat thinks, she looks a little bit afraid right now.

Neither of them seem to know what to say for a long moment as they just look at each other. All Cat knows is that all the anger she was feeling earlier is *gone*.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, though it's a genuine question, not a challenge.

Sam shrugs and looks at her feet. "I came back," she replies. When Cat still doesn't respond to that, she says, "I didn't want to just come in since you..."

Cat steps aside. "Come in."

Sam does, eyes falling immediately to the mess of school supplies and books she left in a heap on the floor. She winces, and sets her backpack down next to the door, so carefully and gently that she might be carrying a kitten inside. Cat brightens at the thought. How cute would that be?

But there's no kitten. There's just Sam, standing by the front door, hands shoved in her pockets, looking like she absolutely doesn't belong here. She's *never* looked so out of place in *their* home, not even on the day they met, when Cat took her here so she could take a shower, and Sam had almost immediately integrated herself, foraging in the kitchen for a snack while wearing Cat's candy robe.

It's heartbreaking how lost she looks.

"Why did you come back?" Cat asks. She feels a little lost, herself. She has no idea what to say now that they're both back in the same place, and they're both clearly not angry anymore.

Sam glances up and meets Cat's eyes for a moment, then looks away, toward the front closet, toward the mess she left there. "Because...that's not how I wanted that to go."

"Me, neither," Cat agrees softly.

Sam takes a deep breath. Cat steels herself for whatever is going to come next. But Sam turns to her, and her face has that particular pinched, crumpled look that Cat *knows* means that Sam is about to cry. "I'm so, *so* sorry," Sam says before the dam breaks, and she turns around completely and presses her face into her hand.

Cat thought her heart had already shattered earlier today, but this feels like a whole new flavor of heartbreak. "Sam," she utters softly, moving closer and putting a hand on her shoulder.

Sam moves away from Cat's touch, but it's not rough, she doesn't jerk away. She just shrugs Cat's hand off her shoulder gently and half turns toward her. "I never wanted to leave you," she says, her voice wavering so hard that Cat can barely understand her.

"I never *wanted* you to," Cat replies. It *still* feels too surreal such that she feels mostly numb, but a lump is forming in her throat, the pressure of unshed tears, and Cat finds herself struggling to hold herself together.

"Then why did you tell me to go?" Sam asks.

It's an extremely understandable question. Cat doesn't know whether it hurts more to hear Sam ask it or that she doesn't even know how to answer. "I don't know," she finally says. Now that she let all that anger out, she no longer remembers *why* it made her so angry that Sam wanted to go see Carly. Sure, she knows that she was feeling jealous and overlooked and

stressed and frustrated and hurt, but...she doesn't know *how* that ended up making her so angry that she told Sam to *leave*.

Her answer apparently just makes Sam break down completely. Cat sees her shoulders shake, hears the soft, sobbing breaths she can't fully stifle, and this time, when Cat reaches for her and puts her arms around her, Sam doesn't resist. She clings to Cat, burying her face in her shoulder, and they hold each other. Cat thinks she's just trying to comfort Sam until she realizes she's crying, too.

They end up on the couch together, holding each other, and when she can speak again, Cat says, "I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault," Sam insists in a dull voice.

"I'm the one who told you to leave," Cat counters.

"I'm the one who broke my promise to you and *left*," Sam retorts, with much more force this time. There's disgust in her voice. Cat realizes after a moment that it's directed at Sam herself.

But Cat doesn't like this. Sam is letting her off the hook, and Cat doesn't want that. "No. Sam. You have to listen to me." Sam looks up at her through red rimmed eyes. Her eyes are the blue of a frosted pane of glass, like only a little bit of light can come through. Only a little bit of *Sam* is showing through. "You have to let me be wrong about this, too."

Sam is shaking her head, but gradually she stops. "Can we talk about what happened?" she asks in a rough, strained voice.

"Do we have to?" Cat asks. Now that she's here, with this soft, *vulnerable* version of Sam in front of her, giving her all her attention and asking for forgiveness, she's reluctant to even look at her actions from not even two hours ago, at her embarrassing level of rage and hurt and jealousy. She feels *ashamed* of her own destructive emotions, in retrospect, despite how inevitable and *necessary* they had felt at the time.

But Sam nods doggedly, "Yeah. I think I need to hear how you were feeling. So I know how to not make you feel that way again."

Cat offers her own reluctant nod in return. They sit on the couch, mostly facing each other, but it's easy for them both to look away as they delve into the difficult experience of *processing*. "I was jealous," Cat begins simply. "Of you and Carly."

Sam looks pained. "I've tried to help you both with your jealousy. You each are getting something the other doesn't have and wants and that's just the way it is right now."

"I *know*," Cat replies, a little heatedly. She feels dismissed by Sam before she even begins. "That's not what I'm talking about. Or, it's not *only* what I'm talking about." Sam frowns, but she seems to be listening, so Cat continues. "It was more because of school, and how it feels like it's taking over my life, and because you don't care about school the same way I do, you

have time to go be with her when I'm just stuck at home doing homework. And I was jealous that Carly has time to spend with *you*, even though she's as serious a student as I am."

"She sometimes has to get up early to finish homework after she spends time with me," Sam admits. "But it's a sacrifice she's willing to make."

"But I *can't* do something like that!" Cat counters forcefully. "I have to follow the routines that *work* for me!"

"I'm not *asking* you to do anything like that!" Sam shoots back. They look at each other and both seem to realize how fraught this conversation is already getting. Sam reaches for Cat's hands, and Cat lets her hold them, and they both take a deep breath together to try to calm down before they continue. "I want you to do what you need to do to succeed in school," Sam finally continues. "I know you're not always going to be so busy and stressed. And I really liked just getting to spend time with you over the weekend when we've been able to go do something fun."

"I like that, too," Cat smiles. "It's just—" She pulls her hands away from Sam's and thinks about the day she had free that Sam chose to spend with Carly while Cat ended up hanging out with Beck and Robbie. She thinks about the Saturday that just passed where they just hung out on the couch like they always do. She thinks about how she feels justified in wanting Sam's attention and companionship on her terms, but realizes that Carly probably has her own terms, and Sam must figure out how to balance them both.

"Just what?" Sam prompts, sounding like maybe she'd rather not know.

Cat decides she should express her thoughts, even though she doesn't know how to do it tactfully. "It's just hard when I feel like I've had so little free time, and I've had to share that time that I could have with you with Carly. But I know that's selfish, too, because it's not like she has infinite free time, either."

Sam nods. "It's not easy to balance everything," is all she offers.

"It just has made me feel like the time that I want to spend with you, you're not there. Even though I know it's not really true and you're here most of the time with me. But then, it's also felt like even when you're here with me, you're *not*, because you're talking with Carly and trying to figure out when you're next going to see her."

Sam looks down and doesn't seem to know what to say to that.

"But I know that I'm just feeling extra sensitive because I've been so busy. It's been *hard*."

"I know," Sam answers.

"So I guess, because of how things were going, it felt like you were just going to leave me for Carly, anyway, so I might as well just *let* you."

"But I'm *not*," Sam replies.

"But you *did*," Cat can't resist pointing out.



Sam looks away. They're both quiet for a moment. Finally, Sam says, "When you told me to leave, I was just so *shocked* by how angry you were. And I just...*ran*. Because that's what I do when things get hard," she adds, almost as if she's talking to herself.

"Were you really leaving me?" Cat asks. Her own outburst had felt justified, to her, but she hadn't actually expected Sam to listen.

Sam shrugs, her mouth twists. "I thought it was what you wanted. I was too hurt and angry to think anything else."

"Then what made you come back?"

"Carly," Sam states.

Cat's eyes widen. "What happened to her?"

"Nothing. She told me that I needed to go home to you."

"She did?" Cat asks in awe.

Sam nods. "She made me stop and think long enough to realize that there was no *way* you actually wanted me to leave you. And the last thing I wanted to do was break two promises to you."

"But...*why* would Carly tell you to come back to me?" Cat asks, still confused. If she's honest with herself, she does *not* think she would encourage Sam to go work things out with Carly if she came home telling her they'd broken up.

The realization that she and Sam had *broken up*, however briefly, hits Cat like a kick in the face from Sinjin.

But she has no time to process it further before Sam replies.

"Because she said she realized that I need you in order to be okay. And she needs me to be okay," Sam answers simply.

Cat is awed by this answer. It doesn't seem real. "You're not making this up?" she asks.

Sam frowns. "No. Why would I? The truth is I was too busy being hurt by you to even realize how hurt you were. I wouldn't have figured out the right thing to do here without Carly. I'm not smart enough for that."

"You're smart!" Cat refutes. It's like a reflex. When she hears something bad about Sam, it makes her want to fight it.

"Sure, I'm street smart," Sam replies easily. "But when it comes to people I care about, I make a lot of mistakes."

Cat supposes she can't refute that. But she wants to be sure of something else, because she's still thinking about the fact that they *broke up*. "We're not broken up anymore, are we?"

Sam reaches over and squeezes one of her hands. “As far as I’m concerned, we don’t even have to count that as a break-up. We had a fight. We made up. It’s not the first time and it probably won’t be the last.”

“I don’t want to fight like this with you ever again,” Cat says softly.

“Me neither.” Sam reaches for her and wraps her in a hug. “I’ll try to do better at thinking about how you feel, and keeping my promises. And I guess I’ve got Carly to keep me in check.”

Cat grins at that notion. She still kind of can’t believe that she has Carly to thank for Sam coming home to her. “And I’ll try to do better at telling you when I feel like I need more of you.”

Sam pulls away, looking guilty. “I would’ve taken you out on Saturday if I knew you needed it.”

Cat considers this. “It was probably good we stayed home. I was tired. But I don’t know if it’s fair for me to make you plan everything. Maybe we can figure out our dates together.”

Sam’s shoulders sag. “That would be great. Once we win that stuffed animal at the arcade, I’m out of ideas.”

“It’s not the planning that makes me feel like you love me,” Cat says, realizing it as she speaks it aloud. “It’s the time I get with you.”

Sam smiles softly at her. “I miss having time with you.”

Cat sighs heavily. “I know. I’m almost done with this crazy school overload.”

“I miss having *sex* with you,” Sam says in a low voice, almost like a growl.

There’s a flutter in Cat’s belly, a little pulse of arousal. “Me, too,” she replies breathlessly.

In a moment, they’re kissing, but it doesn’t escalate. The kisses are soft, gentle, reassuring. Kisses of reconnection, of recommitment, of relief. But after a moment, Cat tucks herself up against Sam, resting her head on Sam’s shoulder, and lets Sam hold her. They breathe together, quiet, offering each other comfort as they let themselves love each other, without complications, without grief. “Let me know when you have to get back to your homework,” Sam murmurs. “And I’ll figure out something for dinner.”

Cat just holds her tighter. “Right now, I have time,” she says.

## Vapors + Dreams

Carly doesn't hear much from Sam for the rest of that evening after she sends her back to Cat. Not that she really expects to. She'd kind of anticipated that her role in this, after she encouraged Sam to do the right thing, would be to just step back for a while. At least she has plenty of school stuff to keep her busy.

In fact, all she hears from Sam that night is a single text around bedtime.

### Thank you

Carly grins. It feels good to do the right thing.

Sam doesn't come over again during the week, which, while Carly *wants* to see her, she also understands. She and Sam text all week, though, so it's not like she feels abandoned, and they make tentative plans to spend some time together over the weekend.

By Friday, they still haven't decided on exactly which day they're going to meet, when Carly gets an unexpected call from Cat as she's walking home from campus.

Her first reaction is surprise, then curiosity, then concern. Is something wrong with Sam? She stares at her buzzing PearPhone for a good four seconds before she actually taps the button to answer. "Hello?" she greets warily.

"Hi, Carly! It's Cat," is the reply. She sounds, well. Exactly the same as she always has.

"Hi, Cat!" Carly answers. She'd stopped in the middle of the sidewalk when the call came in, but now she's walking again, though her pace is slower, her attention on this phone call. She still doesn't know what to expect. "Um, how are you?"

"I'm *really* good, now that my week of hell is over at school," Cat replies conversationally.

"I know the feeling," Carly chuckles.

"Yeah!" Cat says enthusiastically. "So I was thinking, I miss hanging out with you! And I wondered if you wanted to hang out today and, you know, talk?"

"Oh, uh." Not how she thought her Friday was going to go. "Sure! When?"

"Well, I'm done with school, so I can come see you now if you want!"

"Okay, sure!" She knows Cat doesn't drive, so she has to assume: "Is Sam coming with you?"

“No, she went back to campus. This girl in one of her classes asked her today if she’d be willing to destroy this big sculpture thing with a hammer. I guess it’s for art?”

“That sounds like the type of art Sam would be into.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty excited about it,” Cat says cheerfully. “She said she’d send us pictures.”

It’s odd to realize that Cat is relaying something from Sam to her right now, but Carly is wondering about something else. “Are you sure it isn’t easier if I come to you? I can drive.”

“I have a ride,” Cat says easily. “Where’s your apartment?”

Carly is about to answer, but she hesitates. Even though Cat seems completely normal and friendly right now, the idea of inviting her into Carly’s apartment feels like it could be asking for trouble. Carly knows how much Cat has struggled with sharing Sam with her. What if being in the space in which Carly and Sam have had *so much sex* lately is too much for her? Especially since Carly’s studio apartment is basically just a big bedroom.

Carly isn’t *afraid* of Cat, but she does want to tread carefully, if there’s a chance at rebuilding their friendship.

“Actually,” she starts, steering Cat away from her apartment. “I was thinking about going to get a coffee in a few minutes. Want to meet me at Jet Brew?”

“Sure!” Cat answers enthusiastically. “Okay, just tell me which Jet Brew and I’ll meet you there in a half an hour or so!”

“Sounds good. See you soon!” Carly disconnects the call and texts Cat the address of the Jet Brew near her house. Then, she picks up the pace. This gives her enough time to go home, drop off her school supplies, freshen up (which, it feels a little weird to want to look her best to see her girlfriend’s girlfriend who she knows once had a crush on her? But feeling clean and presentable makes Carly feel confident), and then walk over to Jet Brew.

When Carly makes it to Jet Brew, she checks her phone, and doesn’t have any update from Cat. She peers into the storefront window as unobtrusively as she can, not wanting to look like a weirdo, but she doesn’t see Cat inside, so she waits outside. Spring has officially arrived in Los Angeles, though really, it never exactly *felt* like winter when there were pleasant days and flowers blooming the whole time. But Carly certainly notices the difference in her allergies as winter turns to spring. It makes using her CPAP machine more necessary and, conversely, more difficult, with her frequent congestion.

Still, Carly tries to enjoy the sun and the (somewhat) fresh air, despite the strong odor of *city*, while she waits for Cat.

It doesn’t take long for Cat to show up. Carly is surprised to see a red convertible pull up in front of the Jet Brew, the long tail end of the car blocking the side street next to the coffee shop, and Cat hops out. “Thank you!” she calls to the driver.

Carly approaches. She recognizes the driver as a friend of Sam and Cat's, because he had a video in the last episode they made of *iCarly*, but she can't remember his name. Still, she waves at him and says, "Hi," to be polite.

He stares and his face splits into a grin. "You're *iCarly*!"

Carly chuckles a bit awkwardly. "That's me."

"Wow!" he utters.

"Goomer, you can't park here," Cat interrupts to inform him.

"I know how to drive," he insists. But then he frowns. "Where do you want me to go?"

"I don't know, but not here," Cat repeats.

"How long are you gonna be? Because Dice wants me to meet him at the gym in an hour."

"I don't know how long," Cat frowns. "I didn't know you were meeting Dice."

"I didn't know either, he just texted me." Goomer holds up his phone as evidence.

A car beeps from the side street, unable to get past the tail of Goomer's car. This could get messy quickly. "I can give you a ride home," Carly decides.

"Really? I mean, I can always ask Sam when she's done at school."

"Don't worry about it." She waves at Goomer. "Go to the gym, I've got this."

"Okay." He grins a wide, goofy grin. "Nice to meet you!" he calls as he pulls away from the curb and back into traffic.

They both watch him drive away, and then Carly looks at Cat. Cat smiles, wide and cheerful. "Hi!" she chirps.

"Hey," Carly replies, offering a grin of her own. She nods toward the Jet Brew. "Should we get coffee?"

"Let's do it!" Cat answers excitedly.

They go inside and get in line to order. While Cat looks at the board with the drink menu intently, Carly looks around the space, assessing where she wants to sit. Probably the table near the back, that should be private.

Cat interrupts her thoughts. "I never know what to order in places like this."

Carly tilts her head with interest. "That's right. You're not much of a coffee drinker, are you?"

"Not really," Cat shrugs. "Jade always used to just order me the same thing she'd get and tell me I'd get used to the flavor, but I never did. Tori and Sam know I like a lot of cream and

sugar. I think Sam got me a...caramel latte last time we went somewhere?"

"That sounds pretty good," Carly offers. "Or, you know, you can order tea or something."

Cat hums with interest, but maybe the tea selection is just as overwhelming as the coffee choices because when it's her turn to order, she just confidently asks for "a half-caf caramel latte, please" and then falters when she's asked what size and looks to Carly for help. Carly orders her a small, just to be safe, and Cat seems satisfied as she pays.

Carly orders her own medium caffe latte, and confirms that no, she does not want any flavor syrup, and they move down the bar to wait for their drinks to be ready.

"Wow, no flavor? No sugar?" Cat sounds a bit surprised by Carly's order.

"I'm used to it. They don't really do sweet coffee in Italy. Like they might add a little bit of sugar to espresso, but nothing like what we have here."

"Kinda like Jade's coffee with two sugars," Cat muses. She looks a bit pensive. "I guess I'm not a very good Italian if I never got used to the taste of coffee."

Carly chuckles. "Well, it's also *really good* over there. Not like what they serve here." She realizes what she just said in front of a barista and glances over guiltily. The barista shrugs with a bit of a wry grin and continues making their drinks. Carly's relieved.

It's so *odd* to just be standing here having a completely normal conversation with Cat. Now that Carly thinks about it, this is the first time they've really spent any time together, just the two of them. Everything about this situation *should* be awkward, but...it's really not.

While Cat watches their drinks being made with evident fascination, Carly considers her other trips to this Jet Brew, the trips that were more than just a quick stop for coffee. Like the time she and Tori went through the drive through and parked in the parking lot so that Tori could tell Carly that she's friends with Sam and, oh yeah, she's a werewolf, and knows Carly is one, too. Carly remembers how angry she'd been at the time, but she also knows that this one single conversation with Tori changed *everything* about her life in Los Angeles, and set her and Sam back on the path to reconnection, to falling back in love.

And there was the time she and Sam met here, so that Sam could tell her they weren't about to be friends again, but they knew some of the same people, so they'd have to be around each other every once in a while. The first time she'd seen Sam in over a year, and she'd been guarded, had purposely avoided connecting with Carly. It had been a little like talking to a stranger who shared her best friend's face (not unlike the first time she'd met Melanie, except that Melanie had been warm and open from the start, and Sam had been withdrawn, stoic). Yet this, too, had been a crucial step, had cracked open the door, just a little, for them to be friends again.

She remembers how it felt for Sam to give her a ride home on her motorcycle after that conversation, and can almost feel her stomach leap at the memory.

Carly wonders if this trip for coffee with Cat might turn out to be just as momentous. She hopes, if it is, that it isn't the kind of meeting that ends in anger. She'll be satisfied if it ends with a cordial goodbye and an agreement to share space. Though, with how friendly Cat is already being, Carly wonders if it might somehow resolve into something even more pleasant, as unlikely as that seems on the surface.

The barista calls out their drinks and they collect them, and Carly leads Cat toward the table near the back, the same one she sat at with Sam, so long ago. But Cat's demeanor is entirely different as she sits across from Carly. She takes a sip of her caramel latte and her eyes widen. "Hot!" she gasps.

"Be careful!" Carly warns belatedly, then takes a careful sip of her own drink. She watches as Cat blows resolutely into the lid of her drink and finally takes a sip, nodding in satisfaction when she doesn't burn her mouth.

And then, they sit in silence with their coffees, looking at each other and offering smiles, but neither of them speak.

Finally, Carly says, "So...it's good to see you."

Cat takes a sip of her coffee, but Carly can see that she's smiling behind it. "You, too!" she agrees happily after she lowers her cup. "I'm really happy you agreed to meet me."

"Yeah?" Carly prompts. She has *some* idea of what Cat wants to talk about, but she isn't about to push.

"Yeah!" Cat echoes. Her expression turns a little more serious, and levels Carly with her heartfelt gaze. "I really want to thank you. For what you said to Sam the other day, to make her come home to me."

Carly smiles. It's *nice*, but also a little awkward, since she didn't exactly do it *for* Cat. She did it for Sam, and because she knew it was the right thing, and because, honestly, she'd been certain Sam and Cat were going to make up, anyway, and if she'd selfishly encouraged Sam to stay with her, to indulge in her anger at Cat, well...Carly would've been the one who ended up looking pretty bad. But she doesn't need to lay all that out. So she just says, "I just did what I thought was right. You and Sam make each other happy, and Sam's happiness matters a lot to me."

"Yeah. I know." Cat looks down at the table. "It just *surprised* me, that's all."

"I guess I could see that," Carly concedes. "But I was just trying to do—"

"I don't know if I could've done the same, if I were you," Cat blurts, interrupting Carly. Carly blinks at her in surprise. Cat looks guilty, disappointed. "I couldn't help feeling like I had to *compete* with you for this past month or so. Even when I didn't want to. Because I like you! I really do!" Carly looks away as she remembers Cat revealing, in that extremely vulnerable moment, just how *much* she liked Carly, or used to like her. "And I hate that we stopped talking, and I hated feeling like you were my rival. But after you did that for me and Sam," she shrugs, "I guess I just started to feel better about...everything."

“About everything?” Carly asks curiously.

Cat nods, and her smile slowly fades to a more serious expression. “Sam leaving me was basically my worst fear come true,” she says quietly. “But we got through it. Because of you!” Carly shifts a bit, uncomfortable at the credit she’s being granted. “So now it’s not so scary anymore. Because we faced it. It’s like how you’re so nervous the first time you audition for something but after that? Sure, it’s still a little scary, but it’s not *terrifying* anymore.”

“I get what you mean,” Carly tells her.

“Just knowing that you support us, that you have *my* back when it comes to Sam, makes me feel a lot better about you and Sam together. It makes me feel like I could support *you*, if you ever needed me to. Especially after how you kind of just let us have the rest of this week to reconnect and recover, together.”

Carly wants to say that she didn’t do that on purpose, she was just busy with school and it made sense to wait for the weekend to see Sam again. But she doesn’t. She just smiles, feeling a little awkward at how much *goodness* Cat is attributing to Carly’s much more mundane and, in some cases, self-serving actions. But then, she wonders, is it really so inaccurate? She’d always liked Cat, even from the first day they’d met, when she’d expected to be jealous of her and to dislike her on principle, but Cat had been so warm and welcoming that Carly couldn’t help but be won over. And especially faced with her now, she knows she’d never want to do anything to actually *hurt* her. It was easier to entertain the thought in the abstract that she’d ideally like to be Sam’s only girlfriend when she didn’t have to *think* much about Cat, because Cat had been keeping her distance, Cat had been a source of stress and contention for both her and Sam as they attempted to navigate a new connection. And while it is still true that in an ideal world she *would* probably prefer to be Sam’s only girlfriend...she is also well aware that she does not live in that world, and that Cat’s happiness actually *does* matter to her. Not just because it matters to Sam. But because Cat is her *friend*.

If a breakup was something Sam and Cat both actually *wanted*, Carly wouldn’t fight it. But if it isn’t? Yeah. Carly thinks she would do the exact same thing again, if another fight like this ever occurs. Because it’s the *right thing to do*, not only for herself, but for two people she cares about, a lot.

“Do you think,” Carly begins, following her train of thought, “that we could be friends again?”

Cat looks a little surprised. “I guess I thought we still were.”

Carly drops her gaze. “It didn’t really feel like it for a while there. Like, I never thought we were *enemies* or anything like that. I just kind of assumed that we couldn’t be friends as long as we both were fighting over Sam...”

Cat looks a little sad. “I know what you mean. I guess I just thought...I don’t know.”



“I still *want* to,” Carly assures emphatically. “Even if I wasn’t sure if it could happen for a minute there, I *want* to be your friend.”

“Yeah?” Cat asks with a small, shy smile.

“Of course!” Carly tells her. “You’re, you know. You’re really cool and you’re funny and you’re so sweet.” Cat ducks her head, and Carly can see she’s blushing. She continues on quickly, “I know we’ve mostly hung out at parties and stuff but we could just like. Hang out sometime.”

“This is kind of the first time we’ve hung out, huh?” Cat observes. Carly had already considered this, so she just nods. Cat nods along with her thoughtfully. “Maybe you, me and Sam can do something sometime,” she suggests brightly.

“Oh, um.” That hadn’t *exactly* been what Carly meant by hanging out. “Or just...you and me?”

“Really?” Cat seems surprised. “I know you don’t get the time with Sam that you want, so I thought...”

“Yeah, but.” Carly cocks her head. “If there isn’t more to life than just our girlfriend, it’d be pretty boring, don’t you think?”

Cat grins broadly. “That’s true! I spent time with Robbie and Beck a couple of weeks ago, and we had a great time! And I love nights in the park so we can all get together.” She looks thoughtful. “I’ve been so focused on Sam lately that it’s like...maybe I was holding onto her too tightly. Maybe that just made everything worse between us.”

Carly smiles in sympathy, and while a part of her thinks that Cat is probably right, another part of her feels very *protective* of the little time she gets with Sam. In *theory*, she totally agrees with what she said, that she needs time with other friends just as much as she needs time with Sam, but on the other hand, so early into their reconnection, with Sam being both a best friend *and* a lover that she had been so disconnected from for so long, it *really* feels like Sam could literally be the only person she would want to be with for the foreseeable future.

But she knows, logically, that one person can’t be her *everything*. Especially if her one person already *has* another person. No, good friends are important to Carly. She learned that when she had so much trouble making them in Italy, and she feels the difference acutely now that she’s here, in Los Angeles, and she has a group of them she can rely on.

*Especially* the friends she spends full moons with. Cat had mentioned the importance of those nights for her, and Carly is right there with her. Part of the appeal is, of course, more time with Sam, but it’s also time with Tori. Even though she sees Tori more often than she sees Sam, at this point, with all their time in class together, the bonding they enjoy as wolves is very different. And Carly likes to spend time with Jade and, now that she’s less worried about it being purely *awkward*, she’s just as excited to see Cat, as well.

Yeah. Friends are important. And if Cat is ready to keep being friends with her, Carly is going to do her best to keep that connection strong.

It will probably need to be for them to share Sam.

They chat for a little while longer, and it's easy, comfortable, but once their coffee cups are empty, there's little reason to hang around anymore. They throw their cups away and head outside.

"Which way to your car?" Cat asks.

"Oh." Carly realizes she hadn't exactly explained this part. "I walked here."

"Oh!" Cat seems surprised. "So then...which way to your apartment?"

"Follow me," Carly invites, beginning to head in the right direction. "It's a bit of a walk," she confesses. "I hope you don't mind. Sometimes it's easier to just walk somewhere than drive and spend just as much time trying to find a parking spot."

"I used to have to ride my bike everywhere, so I know what you mean," Cat chirps. Her eyes widen slightly. "I mean a bike like a *bicycle* bike, I don't have a motorcycle, I know Sam sometimes calls hers a bike—"

"I understood you," Carly assures her.

This seems to utterly delight Cat to an unexpected degree.

They continue their walk in friendly silence, until Carly feels her phone buzz in her pocket. She takes it out to see a text from Sam, containing nothing but a picture of Sam, grinning and holding a hammer, and standing next to a mess of wood, mesh, plaster, and metal.

A glance shows her that Cat is also looking at her phone. "Did you get the picture?" Cat asks.

"Yeah. Wow," Carly comments. "Glad you told me what she was up to because this picture with no context? That would've been something."

"She does that a lot," Cat replies. "Just sends things with no explanation."

"Oh, I know," Carly chuckles.

It's still a little weird to talk about Sam, to think about how well they both know her, but they exchange a couple more quips and friendly complaints about her most irritating traits and habits as they keep walking. But even if they're quiet for a lot of the walk, it still passes quickly, and before long, Carly points to her building. "I'm parked in the alley behind it," she tells Cat as she begins to guide them down a side street.

But Cat doesn't follow. She looks uncomfortable. "Can I use your bathroom? Please?" she asks.

Carly hesitates, if only because she *still* feels a little weird showing Cat her apartment. But if she's honest, she definitely has to pee after drinking that coffee, and from Cat's expression, it's obvious she needs it desperately. "Of course. Come on up."

All Carly can think of as they climb the stairs is that Cat is about to be in the space where she and Sam meet up to have sex. It's different from the time she saw their bedroom, because their shared bedroom is a reflection of their personalities, with the decorating they've done. Carly's boring apartment is nothing but a sex room. Well, and an everything else room, but something about this feels very different.

She can't think of what to even say when they enter the apartment, and in a panic, just utters, "Ta-da!" as they enter the room, and immediately cringes.

But Cat doesn't even appear to be looking at the room, she's just looking for the bathroom, so Carly points her in the right direction as she already starts walking toward it, and waits, realizing she's going to have to come up with something to say *again*.

She dodges the moment again by going into the bathroom right after Cat, though then she wonders if it's *weirder* to leave Cat by herself in the apartment. When she emerges, Cat is standing by the couch and looking at the books and DVDs on Carly's shelf by her TV. "You ready to go?" Carly asks, a little wary.

Cat just nods and smiles, and they head out toward the car. As they walk down the steps in the courtyard, she finally says, "Your apartment is really cute!"

Carly forces a laugh. "It's really not. But thanks for saying it."

"Well," Cat hedges. "It could use a little more..." She trails off, like she either doesn't know how to say what she's thinking, or is afraid of insulting Carly.

"I keep meaning to decorate," Carly insists.

Cat hums in acknowledgement, but doesn't say anything else as they get into Carly's car. As they settle into their seats, Carly can see that Cat is on her phone. Cat glances up. "I was telling Sam we're on our way home. She says you should come in for a little bit because she wants to see you."

There's a flutter of nervous excitement, both at the prospect of seeing Sam, and the idea of seeing Sam *with Cat*. The casualness with which Cat suggests this is both interesting and alarming. "Alright," is all Carly says, then turns on her car.

The ride home is easy, because the first song to come on the radio is one that they both *love*, and Cat cranks up the volume, though it hardly matters because they sing so loud they drown out Kesha's actual voice.

The trend continues the whole way back to Cat's apartment, as she skips around through stations on the radio to find songs they both enjoy. Carly even has her program one station into her car radio that she didn't know existed. They make it back to the apartment in high spirits, and even after Carly parks, they sit and sing through the end of a song together.

Of course, the next song that starts playing is *another* one they're both excited about, but Carly shuts off the car resolutely, so they don't get stuck sitting and singing for eternity.

“You know, I love riding on Sam’s motorcycle,” Cat bubbles happily as they walk toward the front door of the apartment, “But I love riding in cars because of the radio!”

“I know! I thought it kind of sucked that this car didn’t really have an easy way to connect to my phone so I could listen to PearTunes,” Carly begins, “But then I realized that without listening to the radio in the car, I probably wouldn’t hear much new music.”

“And there’s so much good music out right now!” Cat gushes as she tries the apartment door. It opens and they step inside.

Sam is slouching on the couch, though she immediately tosses her phone aside and stands when she sees them. “Oh, hey, you’re home!” she greets Cat first.

Cat practically skips over to fling herself at Sam in a hug and gives her a quick kiss, but then she immediately steps past her. “We had a great time!” she announces happily. “Be right back!” She continues on down the hall toward the bedroom.

“Oh, yeah?” Sam asks, though it’s directed at Carly this time.

Carly doesn’t bother with an answer this time, she grabs Sam in a hug and kisses her. It’s not quite as swift as Cat’s kiss, but it’s still pretty brief. They’re still holding each other when Cat comes back to the front of the house, and Carly takes a step back at the sight of her. Watching Cat and Sam be affectionate is old news, something Carly barely thinks about, but the idea of Cat seeing *them* is still not something she’s totally comfortable with. It’s partly because of Cat, specifically, but also...she and Sam aren’t used to being seen by *anybody*. Even when they’d gone to the movies a couple of weeks ago, and out to eat the weekend before, they hadn’t really been affectionate in public at all. It *still* feels like a secret, despite both of them expressing that they don’t *want* it to be.

But when they’d gone back to her apartment after going out on their date, they’d *certainly* been physical. Carly supposes old habits are hard to break.

“So what’d you guys do?” Sam asks, looking between them.

“We went for coffee!” Cat reports excitedly.

Sam’s expression shifts to concern. “Oh no. You gave her *coffee*?” she asks Carly.

“Don’t worry, it was a half-caf!” Cat cuts in.

“And Cat chose it, because unlike Spencer, I don’t slip people decaf,” Carly adds firmly.

Sam relaxes, and smiles at Carly’s indignation. “I’m glad you came over. I missed you,” she tells her.

Though Sam’s voice is quiet, she knows it’s not like Cat can’t overhear. Or, she assumes so, anyway, so she glances at Cat, who watches them with a smile, but then Cat starts to walk purposefully toward the kitchen. “Don’t let me interrupt!” she says lightly.

Sam shoots her a smile over her shoulder, then gestures to the couch. “Want to sit?”

“I don’t know,” Carly mumbles uncertainly, but when Sam sits, she follows suit.

“Are you hungry, Sam? Stupid question,” Cat quips. But then she addresses Carly. “You haven’t had dinner yet, have you? You should stay for dinner!”

It’s a *nice* gesture, but Carly isn’t sure she’s ready. She remembers how poorly it went that first day that she and Sam kissed, a month ago, when Cat had assured them both that she was *okay*, but how quickly it became apparent that she was *not*. Even if Cat is, as she says, feeling better about Sam and Carly’s relationship, Carly isn’t about to push it. And, maybe she’s just reading too much into it, but the way Cat has been talking to them from the kitchen, while also saying she’s trying not to interrupt them, feels to Carly like maybe Cat is feeling a little awkward about this, too.

Sam watches her with a hopeful smile. “What do you say, Carls?”

Carly addresses Cat more than Sam with her answer. “I really appreciate it, but I’ll have to pass. I, uh, have some leftovers in my fridge that won’t be good tomorrow that I’d hate to waste.”

It’s a bullshit reason, in Carly’s opinion, but both Sam and Cat seem to find merit in it. “Another time, then!” Cat offers, then sticks her head in the fridge.

Carly realizes she’s kind of been watching her, and turns her attention back to Sam. “How was your hammer art project thing?” she asks.

“It was *awesome*. It was some kind of statement about like, destruction as creation or something, I don’t know. The chick kinda reminded me of Jade. I’m probably gonna send Jade the video she shot of me busting up that sculpture thing.”

“Sounds right up Jade’s alley.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. Carly loves the way her eyes smile at her, even when the rest of Sam’s face can be pretty stoic. Though right now, Sam’s face is soft as she looks at Carly, her mouth curves up into an inviting half-smile. “We never decided what we’re doing this weekend,” Sam says abruptly.

“Do you and Cat have plans?” Carly asks, acutely aware that they can probably be overheard.

“Yeah, there’s this play that the theater department is putting on at our college. We were thinking of going to the Sunday matinee.”

“That sounds fun.” The idea of seeing something, like a movie or a play, suddenly makes Carly reconsider Cat’s offer of doing something together with Sam sometime. It’s harder to be awkward about things like affection or attention when you’re just supposed to be sitting still and looking at something together.

“Yeah, I mean. We’ll see,” Sam says. Carly senses that she’s maybe the less enthusiastic of the two. “But maybe you and I could hang out tomorrow?”

Carly smiles. “We definitely can.”

“What do you want to do?” Sam asks.

Carly shrugs. “We’ll see how we feel tomorrow. I’m open to staying in, though.” Carly has an idea brewing, but she isn’t ready to share it quite yet.

“Cool,” Sam grins.

“Guess I’d better go,” Carly says abruptly, starting to feel like they’re just sitting there being watched by Cat, even though, out of the corner of her eye, Cat seems engrossed in whatever she’s cooking in the kitchen.

As she stands up, Cat calls from the kitchen. “You’re sure you don’t want to stay?”

“No, thanks. But thank you for going to get coffee with me!”

“Anytime!” Cat replies.

“I’ll walk Carly to her car,” Sam announces.

Cat giggles and winks at them and Carly swears it makes Sam blush.

Sam walks alongside Carly as they head toward the parking area. “So it really went okay with Cat today?” she asks.

“It really did,” Carly assures her. “She’s very sweet.”

“I know,” Sam grins.

“She really seems to be feeling better about things,” Carly offers.

“I think she actually is,” Sam replies. “I know she was trying to *make* herself feel good about this for a while there, but I think she’s really, actually starting to get there now.”

“That’s good,” Carly says. It’s genuine, but it comes out a little distant, mostly because Carly is thinking, wondering what might happen if something made Cat feel *worse* again, wondering what might happen if she stays feeling good.

Sam shoots her a searching look. “What about you?”

“What about me?” Carly replies.

“I mean. This hasn’t been easy for you, either. How are *you* feeling?”

Carly shrugs. “Fine, I guess. This is still basically what I signed up for when I started this with you again, but I think it will be easier with Cat and I feeling like friends again.”

“But you didn’t want to stay for dinner,” Sam presses.

“Because I didn’t want to push Cat too far too quickly,” Carly explains.

They're approaching Carly's car now, and she can see the way Sam's focus shifts to it. Sam runs a hand lovingly over the hood of the car, nodding in appreciation as her eyes flit over it. But it turns out it doesn't distract her completely. "That the only reason?"

Carly sighs. Sam knows her too well. "Okay, fine, it's still a little weird to be around *both* of you."

"Because of Cat?" Sam guesses.

"Well, yeah, kind of, but also." She looks at Sam with a serious expression. "It's weird to be with you around *anyone*."

"You mean...like..." Sam says slowly.

"We've never been affectionate with each other around *anybody*. Except that time we kissed in front of Cat and we know how well *that* went," she finishes dryly. She doesn't mention the time in Shadow Creek Park, because though Tori was *there*, it wasn't really *in front* of her, and it's also the kind of place where the rules are a little different, just in general.

"Yeah," Sam nods slowly. "Well, ah." She shuffles her feet a little. "I did kind of come out here to your car to kiss you, so..."

Carly glances around, unable to ignore the impulse to make sure they're *alone*, but then she refuses to let herself dwell on it, and just steps forward and leans over to kiss Sam, wrapping her arms around her, feeling Sam return the embrace, return the kiss, and they both linger together, their kisses slowly becoming shorter, punctuated with light laughter.

Carly presses her forehead against Sam's and closes her eyes, letting the warmth of her, the scent of her skin, permeate her senses. "Well? How was that?" Sam asks.

"So good I kinda forgot where we were," Carly admits.

Sam chuckles, sounding absolutely too proud of herself, but her expression sobers. "Hey, we'll...we'll work on it," she says sincerely. "I mean, our most important friends know what's going on, but not everyone does, and it's not like I like to get all mushy in front of people, anyway."

"Oh, but you *do*," Carly teases. "I've seen you."

"Yeah, but." Sam scratches at her hair awkwardly. "That's because that's what Cat likes. With you...actually I guess I don't know *what* you like because we've never really been able to be public."

"Then we'll figure it out. Together," Carly promises. "It's not like I've ever really had a *girlfriend* that anyone knew about. This is new for me."

"Well, if you ever want me to, like, be more physical in public, just tell me," Sam mumbles. It sounds as awkward as it makes Carly feel. She can't imagine just telling Sam she wants more public displays of affection from her.

So instead, Carly just tugs her a little closer and kisses her again. It's more brief this time, and then she says, "Okay, you'd better go in before Cat comes looking for you."

"Do you think she would?" Sam asks, looking over her shoulder.

Carly shrugs. "Go have dinner. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Definitely," Sam grins. She gives the VW Bug one more pat and stands and watches as Carly drives away.

It's been a weird Friday, and Carly can't wait until tomorrow.

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Despite everything that had happened over the past several days, Sam still approaches Cat with some trepidation the next afternoon. "I'm going to see Carly," she says, trying to make it as casual a statement as possible.

Sam braces herself, just a little, for any kind of barely veiled snide undertone, but instead, Cat simply chirps. "Okay, have fun! I love you!"

Sam stares for just a moment, and then smiles easily at Cat. "You, too! Did you decide what you're doing today?" They both realized that it's also a little easier for Cat when she has plans to do something, too, especially on weekends.

"Yep!" Cat replies happily. "Tori and Jade are taking me to a tea room so we can have a tea party!"

"Oh." Sam raises her eyebrows. "I'll be, uh. Sorry to miss that?"

"You will!" Cat claims. "They have more than just tea, there's food, too!"

"Yeah, but isn't it just little miniscule sandwiches and stuff?" Sam wrinkles her nose. "What an insult."

"If you say so," Cat giggles. She wraps her arms around Sam and kisses her fully. "I love you!" she says again.

"I love you, too," Sam tells her. She keeps her arms wrapped around Cat for just a moment longer so she can look at her, taking in her smiling face, her warm brown eyes, and then releases her with a final peck.

Then Sam gets on her motorcycle and heads to Carly's.

As it usually happens when Sam goes up to Carly's apartment, they start making out almost immediately. Really, they've barely said a dozen words to each other before ending up in this position, with Sam sort of bodily pinned against the back of Carly's sofa, Carly's lips on her neck (just kissing) and her hand up her shirt.



She loves the excitement of everything between them, she loves that they have this little space that feels like it's just *theirs*, but Sam has been thinking about what Carly said about wanting to be seen a little more publicly. Not that she has any intention of doing *this* in public, and she doesn't think Carly does, either, but...maybe it would be good to get some practice going out into public and...seeing what might happen.

Which reminds her. Carly had alluded to some plans. So she finally gathers her wits enough to ask, "What do you want to do today?"

Carly exhales this *sexy* little chuckling sound near Sam's ear. Sam's hair stands on end, in that *good* way. "Well," Carly says quietly, tone sweet but sultry, "I was thinking we could go to the Pleasure Chest." She follows this with another laugh, but this one isn't so sensual. It's nervous, awkward.

Still, it doesn't stop Sam from feeling a flood of warmth pool lower in her body. "*Oh*," she murmurs. "Yeah?"

"Sounds like you know what I'm talking about," Carly comments.

"I've been there," Sam admits quietly.

"Yeah, not really much of a surprise," Carly replies lightly. Sam can smell her curiosity, but Carly doesn't ask what Sam bought there.

So Sam doesn't offer the information. Talking about the sex she has with Cat seems like a great way to ruin the mood. Instead, she asks, "What do you want to get?"

"Something I've been thinking about doing with you for a long, *long* time," is Carly's cryptic reply.

Nevertheless, Sam is pretty certain she knows right away what Carly is alluding to. Her heart sinks even as her arousal spikes. "You mean a strap-on," she breathes.

Carly bites her lower lip and nods, eyes smoldering. "Right about now, I think I *need* it," she confesses, her voice almost slipping into a whimper at the end.

Sam knows exactly what she means. They're only days away from the full moon, and its power is *palpable*. All Sam wants to do is *move* with Carly, to have some kind of frenetic, kinetic friction between them that would satisfy their primal desire for each other. The thrusting of the strap-on, the bodily contact and the mental weight of *penetrating* Carly would be perfect for this, would be intimate, *sexy* and so, *so*, satisfying.

But it can't happen. Sam opens her mouth, but before she can speak, Carly adds, "Actually, I don't know which way I need it. Maybe I need to be inside *you*," she practically growls.

*Oh, god*. Sam feels weak and devastated as she finally utters, "I don't think I can."

"Oh, well, we can keep our original idea of you wearing it, then," Carly says quickly.

“No, I mean...” There’s no avoiding it. She’s going to ruin the mood. “Last time I went to the Pleasure Chest it was to get a strap-on.”

“*Oh*,” Carly utters in a low voice. “So you know how to use it?”

“Not...exactly.”

By now, she seems to have exhausted Carly’s patience. “Sam? Why don’t you just tell me *exactly* what you’re trying and failing to tell me right now?”

Sam sighs, and, perhaps anticipating that this conversation is going to officially take them out of the sexy banter that had been building between them, Carly circles the couch to sit down on it, motioning for Sam to do the same. Sam does, and looks at her hands for a moment. “There’s no easy way to say this.”

“Try me,” Carly answers, her voice a little tight.

“It’s more because...it’s about Cat, not me.” She can see Carly looking at her with mild impatience, so she just decides to say it. “Look, fine. Cat and I bought one, and we tried it, and it didn’t really work. But we’ve been trying. But it feels like something...” her voice dies for a moment as she sees the expression on Carly’s face, the one full of disappointment and mild incredulity. “...she and I need to do first,” Sam finishes.

“What do you mean it didn’t—” Carly holds up a hand. “You know what? I probably don’t need to know.” She takes a breath. “You know I respect you and Cat and the boundaries you need,” she says slowly. “But I don’t really get this one. And also it doesn’t sound like something you’ve talked about with Cat.”

“Just trust me, okay?” Sam pleads. “The thing we’re struggling with is something that makes Cat feel really, like, inadequate, and I’m worried if she finds out I’m doing this with you instead, it’ll ruin all the progress she’s made.”

“And...you think there’s a good chance she’ll find out about it?” Carly asks incredulously.

Well. “No. Probably not. But if she *did*,” she stresses the last word significantly.

“Right,” Carly says doubtfully. Sam frowns at her, but Carly pushes on. “Okay, I don’t need the details, but I’m going to guess that what you two are into involves *you* wearing it, right?”

“I mean we’re open to—” But Sam catches herself before she tells more than she needs to. “Basically, yes,” she sums it up.

“So then is there any problem with me wearing one for *you*?” Carly asks.

Sam considers this. It doesn’t seem to have the same emotional *weight* of the prospect of her wearing the strap-on. But...she also knows she probably needs to talk to Cat, first. Especially since she kind of already talked about things from the other side with Carly. It’s only fair. Even if Sam dreads the conversation. “That could work, but...I need to talk to Cat, first.”

Carly sighs, but nods her acceptance. But then she frowns, a little petulantly. “But I want to... get *fucked*,” she breathes.

The sound of that request seems to ignite Sam’s entire body. “Fuck,” she murmurs, but then, she gives Carly a wry grin. “There’s no reason I can’t use a toy on you with my hands.”

“Yeah?” Carly asks. Her eyes are dancing with a feral light. Sam could swear they were about to turn amber with the change.

“Let’s go right now. On my bike,” Sam offers urgently.

“Oh, we don’t have to unless we’re getting a strap-on harness,” Carly says briskly. “I already have a toy.”

“You—you *do*?” Why hadn’t they been using it all along?

“I’ve been single for a long time,” Carly answers, a little defensive.

“That was *not* judgment,” Sam assures her, very emphatically. “What do you have?” she asks curiously. While she and Cat have used the unicorn horn dildo with some regularity, they don’t really have much else. Sam is curious what else is out there, what else might be fun.

“Well,” Carly drawls, then heads over to her bed. She crouches down and wriggles under the bedframe, fully half of her body disappearing beneath her bed, before she emerges, dragging a shoebox with her.

“Jeez, no wonder I never found them,” Sam comments as she watches Carly straighten back up and push her hair out of her face. “You have to do that every time?”

“I’m trying to be *discreet*. Also, I *needed* to make sure Freddie never found them.”

Sam shudders. “Please never mention Freddie in the context of sex or sex toys or *anything* sexual ever again.”

Carly laughs. “Yeah, good point.” She fiddles with the lid of the shoebox. “I don’t have much,” she starts apologetically.

“Are you trying to *kill* me with curiosity? Just show me!”

“Fine.” Carly lifts the lid.

Sam peers in eagerly and stares. There’s definitely a dildo in there; it’s pastel blue, which makes its approximation of anatomical correctness more palatable. There’s also a much smaller toy that Sam assumes is a vibrator since it seems way too small to insert, and a bottle of lube.

“I told you it wasn’t much,” Carly states.

“You really use these?” she asks. Suddenly, the idea of Carly using toys on herself is the hottest thing Sam can imagine. At least, until she remembers that *she* might be able to use

them on Carly.

“Yep,” Carly smirks. “Sometimes at the same time.”

Sam turns wide eyes to her and Carly’s grin turns even more sly. Sam picks up the dildo. “So this. This is what you like,” she comments. The unicorn horn she and Cat play with at home tapers until it’s thicker than the girth of this toy, but this dildo *starts out* at the same width. Sam is intrigued.

Carly shrugs. “It’s certainly serviceable.”

“I’ll show you *serviceable*,” Sam growls, tugging Carly to her by her shirt collar and kissing her roughly.

It’s the start to an encounter that ends with Carly naked, bent over on her knees on her bed, while Sam, still wearing her underwear, fucks her from behind with the dildo, as she kneels next to her or leans over her and leaves scratches and hickeys all over Carly’s back, in between soothing kisses. She treasures the sound of each moan as she increases the speed of her thrusts, purposely varying the intensity to gradually build Carly up as they both enjoy the outlet of the *physicality* as Sam pours her energy into Carly’s pleasure. Sometimes, Sam kneels behind her and thrusts inside of Carly *deep*, holding the toy there with her body (though because of their height difference, it’s a little more her stomach than her hips doing the steadying), and she *longs* for the moment when she can do this kind of full-body thrusting with her lover, as she holds still, fully sheathed, nails raking down Carly’s back as she listens to her whine.

Finally, though, Carly leans over onto one elbow and reaches between her own legs, fingers stroking rapidly, and it takes less than a minute before she comes, pushing and bucking back against Sam and the toy she still holds, Sam’s other arm wrapped around Carly’s torso, Sam’s mouth murmuring praise and awe between kisses pressed against Carly’s shoulder blade.

There’s barely a moment of recovery time before Sam finds herself on her back, Carly tugging off her underpants. She feels so *energized*, so intimately *connected* with Carly and the power of the moon that seems to blaze brightly between them, propelling them together, pushing them closer. Carly leaves rough kisses all down Sam’s torso—Sam has to tug her hair to remind her not to leave any marks—and Sam assumes that Carly is about to go down on her, but just before she kisses down that far, she lifts herself back up, grinning mischievously.

“We never got to play with one of these, either,” Carly observes, holding the vibrator from the shoe box.

“I can’t say I really ever have in general,” Sam admits, staring at it.

Carly looks *very* shocked. “*Really?*”

“Well, I mean, I have this neck massager that like *kinda* works like that but it was a little too intense so I never really...*used* it used it.”

Carly blinks at that and shakes her head. “Oh, we are definitely trying it now.” She gives another wicked smirk. “Let me know if this is too much.”

Sam has only enough time to nod before the sound of buzzing pierces the air, and at first, the sensation between her legs reminds her of her motorcycle, a powerful rumbling that eventually becomes numbing, but only for a moment, before Carly shifts the target of the vibrator to Sam’s clit, and suddenly Sam is glad that her motorcycle isn’t stimulating in *this* way. She inhales a quick gasp, feeling her body jolt a little with the surprise of the sensation, and then she stutters out a little involuntary, “Oh-oh.”

Carly grins with impish delight as she slowly moves the toy around and against Sam, trying to find more areas that make Sam *jump* with pleasure, and Sam closes her eyes, letting herself get lost in the sensation, when the pleasure disappears.

She blinks open her eyes and sees Carly still holding the buzzing toy, but up and away from Sam. “Why?” she asks.

“Because we still haven’t tried this.” Carly holds up the still-slick dildo.

“You want me to—you think I can—”

“I told you, they’re great in combination,” Carly says lightly. “And that I really wanted to fuck you,” she adds quickly, though the power of all the *sex* they’ve already had takes most of the awkward tinge out of her words. Sam finds Carly is better at dirty talk when she’s not trying too hard. But Carly looks at Sam searchingly. “Only if you want to,” she adds.

Sam *wants* to, most of all because Carly wants her to, and they’ve been playing this game for as long as they’ve known each other, and she *longs* for the intimacy of Carly inside of her. In this state, Sam wants *everything*. “I want it,” she breathes.

Carly grins like she’s just been given the best gift she’s always wanted, and brings the toy down between Sam’s legs. “Ready?”

Sam nods, shifting her hips and spreading her thighs a little more, watching Carly’s eyes focus on her body, and then feels the tip of the toy press against her.

For a moment, she remembers the way Cat felt, like there was some *barrier* keeping her from taking more penetration from the unicorn horn dildo, and Sam feels like the same thing is happening to *her*, like there’s no way she’s going to be able to take something that starts out so wide, and feels a strange envy of the way Carly was able to accept it with a clearly practiced ease, but then she stops, and breathes, and the sensation of pressure gives way to a mildly uncomfortable sense of *opening*, and then the tip of the toy is inside her, and the sensation pushes an exhale out of her, a breath she’d forgotten to release before. “*Fuck*,” she murmurs.

“You look so good,” Carly praises. She blinks, perhaps realizing something belatedly. “Have you done this before?”

“Not like this,” Sam explains.

“Tell me if you want more,” Carly instructs her.

Sam nods, not trusting herself to speak, and feels the toy move deeper. Now that it’s inside her, there’s only the sensation of *fullness*, of *deep* connection, of the vulnerability of literally opening her body up to someone else, to let them inside of her where she’s soft and warm and delicate...or not so delicate, considering what this part of the body is capable of. Sam gazes up at Carly and thinks, for a wild moment, how appropriate this is, considering she’s always felt like Carly has been inside of her, a core piece of her identity, all along.

“This is *so sexy*,” Carly breathes, and it almost sounds like she’s talking to herself, with the way she watches the movement of the toy as it slowly pushes in and out of Sam. A few long, slow moments (and long, slow thrusts) later, Carly looks up and meets Sam’s eye, and her other hand holds up the vibrator, and the sound of it buzzing fills the air, fills Sam’s skull.

“Oh, my god,” Sam manages, and nods when Carly gives her a questioning look, and then Sam’s eyes slam shut at the sensation of both toys against her, within her. She shifts and moans with the sensation, the slow thrusts of the dildo, the steady, insistent hum of the vibrator and the waves of pleasure it sends through Sam’s flesh. The vibrator is almost *too* intense. Sam can feel her head bending back, her back arching, as the powerful vibrations bring her quickly closer and closer to orgasm.

The sensations disappear abruptly. Sam slumps back against Carly’s bed and stares at her with wide eyes. “What?” she asks dumbly.

“Didn’t want you to come too fast,” Carly says sweetly.

“*Why?*” Sam asks, propping herself up a little on one elbow to glare. “Kinda the point of all this.”

“Because I’m not done with you,” Carly replies simply. “I’ve wanted this for a *long* time,” she confesses in a soft voice. “Sometimes, I used to use these toys on myself and imagine I was using them on *you*.” Sam is awash in heat and euphoria with the words, and the slow thrusts of the toy inside her are *not enough*. “So maybe let me savor it a little?” Carly’s voice ticks up in a question, taking her completely out of sultry and back to her sweet and slightly awkward baseline.

Sam doesn’t care. She’s so turned on she can barely articulate her thoughts, which are like a plate of tangled spaghetti noodles of mostly *yes* and *more* and various obscenities. Eventually, she manages to groan some sort of affirmative “Uh huh,” and watches the way Carly beams.

“I’m so glad you listen to me,” Carly replies, sounding cheerful and almost conversational. Sam feels the pace of the thrusts inside her pick up and she inhales sharply. Carly eyes her. “Too much?”

“N-no,” Sam manages, and finally utters the word that’s been ringing in her head for a while now, “More.”

Carly hums in satisfaction and the toy moves a little faster. It moves easily, and it *feels* good, but it's not going to be enough for Sam, and she knows it, even as she shifts her hips to meet the thrusts of the toy, trying to maximize sensation. Maybe Carly knows it, too, because a moment later, the vibrator is back in play again and Sam feels a groan fall from her lips. It's *so intense*, but it's not exactly where Sam needs it, and as she tries to angle her pelvis to adjust the placement, Carly withdraws it.

Sam lets out a frustrated whimper. "Will you *just*—" she cuts herself off, knowing she'd told Carly literal moments ago to take her time with her, but it's getting *excruciating*, it's almost *unbearable* how close Sam feels, *has* felt since the vibrator first came into play, and she's *just not* being given enough to get off.

"Don't worry," Carly purrs. "I'll get you there." Though an expression of concern flickers over her lustful expression. "Tell me if it's too much."

It *is* too much, but Sam isn't going to tell her that. There's something between them, right now, that makes her feel like giving in would mean losing face. Like playful skirmishes between wolves, not to find out who is dominant in any kind of *permanent* sense, but to find out who is on top, at least for the moment.

And though *on top* is really the *last* thing Sam feels right now, she also has a sense that the vulnerability of her role, that acquiescing to Carly taking her time with her, will be worth her impatience, will grow their intimacy, will help to heal the last vestiges of the wounds they've given each other. The heightened connection between them in this moment feels taut, but not like it's about to snap, more like it vibrates in the air, like a plucked guitar string, filling both of them with the music of their love.

The sound of the vibrator feels harmonious, in tune with the current of love flowing between them, and Sam feels it again, feels the way it builds her up, taking her right to the edge, before Carly withdraws it again.

Sam whimpers pitifully. "I could just flip you over and have my way with you again," she threatens. By now, though, it's a completely idle threat, playful, punctuated by the baring of her teeth in a savage grin. Sam is fully invested in their game at this point, fully aware of the power she's yielding to Carly, and fully aware of the sexiness that it's *with her permission and participation*.

"But you won't," Carly says simply. By now, she's thrusting so hard inside of Sam that it feels much like what Sam did to her earlier, powerful and like each movement knocks the breath out of her. Carly presses the vibrator back against her and Sam feels her stomach start to dip, wants to open her mouth in warning, but Carly speaks first. "Because you like it when I tell you what to do."

The vibrator is pulled away, but it's too late, everything is too intense, and maybe it's also Carly's words, but abruptly, the next couple of thrusts of the dildo are enough, and Sam is coming, jolting and bucking and undulating, the moans falling from her mouth feeling almost like a howl, a cry of connection, until Sam can no longer move, no longer has the breath to even whine.

In moments, Carly is curled up next to her, and Sam wraps arms around her. She feels unexpectedly *raw*, like all her skin is that pink, new skin that grows in beneath a wound, and abruptly feels almost *mortified* by what happened between them, but how much she just lay on her back and *took*.

“I love you,” Carly murmurs in her ear, and Sam is awash with warmth, and everything feels right again.

“I love you,” she answers, the words stringing together. It’s almost still too hard to speak them in the wake of something that leaves her feeling so *naked*, metaphorically, but also literally, too.

“That was *fun*,” Carly gushes, lifting up a little to look at Sam, her expression relaxed, even a little mischievous.

It *was*, but... “That was intense,” Sam adds.

Carly's expression shifts to doubt. “Was it too much? Did I go too far?”

“No,” Sam assures her, and leans up to kiss her, softly, gently. “It was *a lot* but I’m glad we did it that way. There’s...there’s no one else I’d trust to do something like that with other than you,” she admits.

She can see the way Carly grins, triumphant, and Sam wants to explain that this isn’t a contest, that she hasn’t beaten Cat in anything. It’s just that Cat and Carly have always been *different*. It’s not like Sam doesn’t have or wouldn’t want this level of vulnerability with Cat. She *has* it, it’s just...*different*. She wouldn’t trust Cat for this exact same scenario for the main reason that she doesn’t think Cat would *want* to do anything like what Carly just did.

But it’s too much to articulate, and Sam is too wrung out, but maybe Carly understands, because she kisses Sam’s hair and murmurs, “I don’t think there’s anyone else I’d want to do this with, either.”

Later, after some more cuddling and relaxing with Carly, followed by food and a movie (in the apartment, so they don’t even really have to get dressed again), Sam goes home. She already knows that Cat is home, because Cat had texted her when she was on her way back about an hour ago. Sam’s ride home is automatic, almost *dreamy*. Not in an unsafe way, just on that autopilot way in which the route and the traffic and the lights are all navigated with unconscious ease, because Sam’s mind dwells on her evening with Carly, for all its intimate glory.

When she gets home, Cat is in the kitchen, and flashes her a smile. “You’re home!” Cat cheers. “I was just trying to figure out dinner.”

But Sam isn’t even thinking about dinner. Instead, she’s looking at Cat, and feels so eternally *grateful* for the big heart her girlfriend has, the expansive love and the deep compassion of her partner that means that Sam gets to have that beautiful, intense and edgy sex she’d had with Carly today, and then also come home to the person who truly *is* her home, every day.



“What?” Cat asks, tone a little coy, as she smiles at Sam, who realizes she’s just been staring at Cat with a big, probably creepy, smile.

“I just really love you,” she tells her.

“I love you, too!” Cat answers happily, “Now, what do—*omph*.”

Cat’s answer had been genuine, but it was such a rote recitation of the words they so often exchange that Sam felt like it wasn’t enough. She needs to *show* Cat how much she loves her, and she needs to do it now.

She has Cat pinned up against the glass patio door, and they’re kissing deeply, almost immediately, and Sam realizes it’s actually been a *little while* since they had sex; Cat’s school work and those busy couple of weeks had cut into the time they had for sex, and in the aftermath of their fight, they were both more interested in cuddling and bonding in other ways, to bring back the trust between them. But judging by Cat’s enthusiastic reaction to Sam’s kisses...maybe they’re on the same page, here.

Maybe *definitely*, judging by the way their making out starts to change, as Cat hops up and wraps her legs around Sam’s waist, still pinned bodily between Sam and the door. Sam’s hands slide up the backs of her thighs to grab her ass under her skirt, both to keep Cat stable, and because she *loves* the sound Cat makes when she kneads the sensitive flesh.

“Sam?” Cat murmurs, when their lips finally disengage so that Sam can press kisses against Cat’s neck.

“Hmm?” Sam hums.

“Take me to the bedroom.” It’s more of an order than a request, and Sam absolutely obliges, carrying Cat the whole way.

Sam kicks open the bedroom door, and out of habit, turns to kick it closed again, which leads to her pressing Cat against this door, too, and continues to kiss her, to hold her up. She grazes her teeth against Cat’s neck, listening for the intake of breath with the hint of a whine, and the hands on Cat’s ass begin to move, seeking the heat of her, between Cat’s legs. Sam presses and strokes the area, though it’s difficult at this angle, through Cat’s underwear, to center her movements, but she hears Cat whimper in her ear, feels her hands scrabble at the back of Sam’s leather jacket, as if struggling to hold on tighter, and Sam growls in her ear, “I’ve got you,” before sucking at a spot on Cat’s collarbone.

Cat’s breath is hot against her ear, and Sam’s knees nearly buckle at the sensation of her lips gently tugging at Sam’s earlobe. Then Cat’s voice, low and slightly raspy with desire but unmistakably her honeyed tone, murmuring in her ear, “I need you. And don’t hold back.”

Sam trembles, feeling too hot all over, and carries Cat over to her bed, where she drops her onto her mattress. Cat laughs gleefully as she bounces, and reaches for Sam, who throws off her leather jacket and climbs on top of her. Cat’s kisses are full of passion and want, and Sam can feel her nails running down her back, through Sam’s t-shirt, and feels like they’re being elevated even higher, together.

It doesn't take long before clothes come off, quickly, as if they both think they're under some sort of time limit, and Cat is naked beneath her, beaming up at her, dark eyes glowing with affection. Sam sees her eyes dip down to her breasts and her eyebrows furrow, and follows Cat's gaze to see the barest hint of a mark. Carly must've gotten a little careless. Sam flushes, fearful of Cat's reaction, but Cat just grabs Sam's head and pulls her down for a rough kiss. Sam relaxes, feeling like she's side-stepped trouble, and moments later, without preamble, Sam lifts her head and follows her instincts, follows her desire, follows Cat's invitation, and slips two fingers inside of her girlfriend, feeling the heat and warmth, the pressure of her walls, watching the way her head tips back and her eyes flutter shut as she exhales in a moan that is *just* distinct enough that Sam can hear her own name on Cat's lips.

"This what you want?" Sam growls against Cat's shoulder.

Cat whimpers in the affirmative, fingertips gripping into the flesh of Sam's back. She lifts one thigh to press between Sam's legs, encouraging her to move flush against her. Sam lets out a shuddering little gasp, still feeling a little raw and sensitive from her recent sex with Carly, but the feeling quickly fades to pleasure as she and Cat find their connection, and Cat's other leg tangles up with Sam's, leaving herself open, giving Sam's hand room to maneuver.

Sam's fingers push inside of her, moving steadily but easily, massaging her, as her mouth connects with Cat's and her hips push steadily against Cat's thigh. They're both moaning in unison, Cat's breaths following the rhythm of Sam's fingers. They're in tune, they move together naturally, without thought, maintaining the same connectivity even as Sam's fingers start to move faster.

The sounds pouring from Cat's mouth start to become less distinct, begin to blur together in a cacophony of pleasure, and Sam gasps out her own groans against Cat's neck, feeling her own body clench in rhythm with Cat's. The air is electric with their passion, the rush of blood in Sam's ears echoing the beating of Cat's heart beneath her. And Cat is *beautiful*, the flush over her olive skin, the way her eyelashes flutter over her desert-brown eyes, her parted pink lips, every delicious inch of her, beneath Sam, is *Sam's* to enjoy, to fill with pleasure, to fuel into ecstasy.

Sam adjusts her hand so her palm puts pressure against Cat's clit, enjoying the change in the sounds of her moans, the momentary press of nails into the flesh of her shoulder, and then Cat just seems to be holding onto her, hips lifting slightly, thigh pressing into Sam rhythmically, until there's an explosion of sound and motion and *bliss* beneath Sam that has her pressing her mouth against Cat's shoulder and spurs her into her own orgasm, the two of them riding the waves of each other's rapture.

When it's over, Cat is so *euphoric* she's giggling in Sam's arms, and Sam can't help but laugh with her. It's so *joyful*, the renewal of their sexual connection. Sam remembers the last time they touched each other like this had been in anger, and *now*...this had been ferocious, this had been wild, but there had been nothing but love swelling up in them both.

"I love you," Cat tells her, pressing a series of kisses against her face until she reaches her lips, and the sound of her voice is like a song.

“I love you,” Sam answers, voice strong and steady, anchoring them both as they come down from the heady experience they’ve shared.

Sam reflects, as they hold each other, how different things are with Cat compared to Carly. With Carly, the power of the moon seems to reflect between them, like light bouncing between mirrors, reverberating and colliding until it’s almost blinding in its intensity. With Carly, Sam can let go of control, can let Carly take her somewhere new, can let Carly knock the thoughts from her head as they become beasts together, relying on instinct and senses they barely have words for to push each other further.

With Cat, Sam *is* the wilderness, and Cat is the grounding force that *Sam* brings into chaos with her, a ride Cat is always willing to take. The intensity doesn’t balloon beyond their control; Cat is the receptacle for Sam’s feral energy, the den for Sam’s lupine self, her *home*. Cat is comfort, Cat is safety, and within that safety, Sam can be *herself*, within the bounds of their trust. Sam can control the encounter, Sam can be the driving force, Sam can make the choices.

As she’d wanted to explain to Carly, it’s just *different*. Nothing lesser, nothing better. The complexities of Sam need more than one outlet, more than one form of love, to find fullest expression. Coming home to intimacy with Cat after her time with Carly feels like a warm bath after an intense workout—if Sam ever bothered with intense workouts.

And Sam has absolutely found that dichotomy of expression, with Cat and Carly. She marvels at how lucky she is, that when the full moon is close, and its power so potent she can almost taste it, she can enjoy both the ferocity of Carly, and the safety of Cat, on the same day. It makes her feel *whole*.

The only challenge now is maintaining the balance between them.

But right now, all she has to worry about is Cat, and matching the pace of her breath with her girlfriend’s as they hold each other and recover together.

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It’s not like she and Tori have been *completely* out of touch with their trio of friends who are apparently (almost) all sleeping together, but Jade is still a little surprised when the three of them all show up at Tori’s together on Monday, the first night of the full moon. In Cat’s grandmother’s car, no less.

“We decided it didn’t make sense to take two vehicles when we’re all going across town to the same place,” Cat explains lightly.

“Even if a motorcycle is a lot faster,” Sam grumbles idly.

“It was nice to make the trip with other people for once,” Carly adds pleasantly.

Jade is dying to ask who rode shotgun, but refrains. She can ask Cat when they’re alone, later. But apparently Tori has no chill, because she bursts out with the question, “Who rode in front?”

Carly's eyebrows rise, perhaps in warning, Cat giggles, perhaps in awkwardness, and Sam just has that unreadable look she sometimes gets that can mean she absolutely doesn't care what's happening or she's plotting revenge.

But it's Cat who answers. "Carly did, but I rode in the front yesterday!"

"Right," Tori nods, then frowns. "But...don't you always ride in the front when it's just you and Sam?"

"Yeah," Cat says slowly and patiently, "But since Carly sat in the back yesterday it was her turn to sit up front *today*," she explains.

"Wait, what happened yesterday?" Jade interjects, not wanting to wait for Tori to connect the dots. Not that it takes Tori long, because she looks just as curious as Jade feels.

"We went to see a play at Sam and Cat's school!" Carly informs them happily.

"Like...all together?" Tori asks. She sounds surprised, is clearly seeking clarity.

"That is what *we* means," Cat answers, a bit snide, looking at Tori worriedly.

"No, I know!" Tori says quickly. "Sorry, I just...I didn't know you three were hanging out like that," she finishes.

"To be fair, it kind of just started," Carly soothes.

"Yeah, Sam and I were trying to plan a date, and I really wanted to go see this play, but Sam wasn't that excited about it. But I remembered that Carly sounded interested, so I thought that if Carly and I *both* went, maybe Sam would have more fun!" Cat explains.

"It *sort of* worked," Carly adds.

Sam frowns. "The problem is when a play is really boring I'm not allowed to *do* anything. Having both of you there didn't help, it's not like I could just *talk* to you, instead."

"It wasn't boring!" Cat says, at the same time that Carly says:

"It wasn't *that* boring."

"Speak for yourselves," Sam mutters.

"Well, we didn't *sleep* through it, so we'd know," Carly says dryly.

"What play was it?" Jade wants to know.

"An adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter*," Cat answers.

"Except not as good as *Easy A*," Carly adds.

"Well, that's a given," Jade comments.

“How do you make a play about, like, sinful sex so goddamn *boring*?” Sam complains.

“Luckily, none of us have that problem,” Tori jokes, then looks like she regrets it immediately. Jade shoots her a glare.

“Sorry about her,” Jade drawls. “I think Tori has forgotten what it’s like to be around normal people.”

“She’s right,” Tori groans, her shoulders slumping. “I’m totally fried from school. There are *so many idiots* in my classes. Except for Carly, of course,” she adds quickly.

“I’m only sorry we didn’t get put in the same group project,” Carly sympathizes.

“Yeah, I’m jealous you got yours over with so early in the semester,” Tori gripes.

The doorbell rings, and Jade answers it to retrieve the pizza they’d all texted about earlier, leaving Tori and Carly to complain about their classes together. Jade envies their camaraderie, a little. She’s met a handful of people who are decidedly *not* idiots in her classes, but they’re few and far between, and since Jade isn’t exactly known for making friends, she hasn’t reached the kind of closeness with any of them that would allow her to complain about all the actual idiots with someone else in the know. Tori listens to her, of course, but she’s never there with Jade. And even if Sam and Cat attend different classes, they get to at least travel to campus together every day.

But Jade also knows that out of all of them, she does best as a loner. And maybe that’s okay, maybe she should stick to her strengths. But it *does* mean that she looks forward to these group outings with her girlfriend and their closest friends almost as much as the werewolves do.

And it’s a fairly typical, but great full moon experience; they eat pizza before Jade drives them out to Shadow Creek Park, the werewolves change, and playfully come tumbling out of the trees to sniff and jump up on and play with Jade and Cat.

They even all play a little longer than normal; Jade is reluctant to leave just because she didn’t actually get much time with Tori over the weekend due to the group project she was working on, and Cat seems equally as reluctant as she giggles and watches the three goofy werewolves wrestle around like three of the dumbest dogs anyone’s ever seen. Sometimes, their weird, long-legged proportions don’t do them any favors. As Jade has told Tori many times. Even when she’s not in wolf form.

Eventually, though, she and Cat get into the car to drive back to Jade’s house. Jade watches out of the corner of her eye as Cat’s gaze stays fixed out the window, watching the three wolves run off into the scrubby desert distance, until she can’t see them anymore and turns around in her seat.

“So...” Jade finally drawls as they continue quietly down the abandoned road.

“So what?” Cat asks.

“So what’s going on with you three?” Jade asks directly.

Cat smiles. “We’re in a *much* better place than we were last month,” she gushes.

“I can see that,” Jade intones. But when Cat doesn’t elaborate, Jade takes a guess. “So did you finally get what you want with Carly?”

“Meaning what?” Cat asks.

“Meaning are you and Carly *also* fucki—”

“*No!*” Cat says, quickly and sharply.

Jade glances at her to see that she’s bright red. “Wow, okay,” she chuckles. Cat turns her face away. “It was just a question. Don’t get your panties in a bunch.” She grimaces even as she says it. She hates the word...she’s not even going to repeat it to herself.

“Sorry,” Cat mumbles. She fans her face with both hands. “It’s just *embarrassing*.”

“The idea of you and Carly fu—”

“Jade!”

“What?”

“Stop saying it!”

“Okay,” Jade drawls. As the silence stretches, she presses again. “But really, though. What changed?”

Cat smiles. “I found out just how much Carly wants Sam and I to be together,” she explains.

“In what way?”

“It’s a long story,” Cat says. “And one I don’t really want to talk about.” Jade nods; even she won’t press Cat when she’s that direct. “But it’s helped Carly and I to get back to being friends. Which makes things a lot less weird between the three of us.”

“Right,” Jade mutters. She thinks about last month, when she and Tori had predicted that this...polyamorous situation wouldn’t last more until this full moon. Instead, it seems the trio is doing great. It surprises Jade, too, because Tori talks to Carly almost every day, and as far as she’s heard, Carly hasn’t reported any sort of change like this.

Either way, Jade is kind of relieved that her prediction has been proven wrong.

“I’m really happy for you,” she tells Cat.

“Thank you!” Cat chirps. “I really think we’re making the best of all of this.”

“Guess so, if you’re all this happy.”

“What about you?” Cat asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you happy?”

“Yeah...” Jade draws out the word suspiciously. “Why?”

Cat shrugs. “You always ask how I am. I wanted to ask about you.”

“I’m peachy,” Jade answers, though it’s tinged with sarcasm.

Cat frowns. “When you say it like *that*...”

“Oh, come on. You know me. I’m *fine*. And if I weren’t, I’d probably just make a really deliciously fucked up movie. Which would make me *better* than fine.”

“I guess,” Cat replies uncertainly.

Jade sighs. Why is Cat asking how she is if she doesn’t even believe her answer? “Look, I’ve got the hottest nerd in the world for a girlfriend. I’m in a college program that just shows me every day that I’m much better at filmmaking than everyone else. I have a great group of friends.” She glares at Cat for emphasis. “I’m literally *fine*.”

“I believe you,” Cat answers.

“Good.”

“It’s just nice to feel like you can confide in *me* sometimes, too.” Cat’s tone is slightly petulant.

Jade side-eyes her. “What do you mean?”

“I just mean, I tell you stuff and ask you for advice all the time. But you just.” She gestures with her hand. “Keep being Jade all the time but it’s not like you ever need *me*.”

Jade huffs out a breath through her nose. “What do you want from me?”

“A little emotional intimacy would be nice.”

Jade cringes. “That’s disgusting.”

“That’s friendship.”

“Maybe all that *emotional intimacy* is why you keep wanting to fuck your friends.”

But this time Cat isn’t fazed. “I just want to know what’s going on with you. *Everything* can’t *always* be the same.”

“Fine. You want to know what’s going on with me?” Jade asks, almost aggressively. “It’s time for a special edition of Stuff I Hate, Film School Edition.”

For the rest of the drive, and for the next hour or so that they're hanging out in her room, Jade finds herself ranting and raving about the people in her program, the stupid assignments she has to do, all the things that prove to her that her Hollywood Arts education and her do-it-yourself method of teaching herself how to make films as a young teenager has put her so far ahead of the curve as to be almost *bored* at times. Cat listens attentively, gasps and hums and shakes her head with empathy, but otherwise, barely gets a word in edgewise while Jade talks until her voice is hoarse.

When it's over, Jade has to admit she feels a lot better.

"There, was that so hard?" Cat asks sweetly.

"Shut up," Jade growls.

They do homework side by side, though they both finished most of it over the weekend, and then end up falling asleep watching *The Godfather*, which Jade is supposed to watch for class.

Jade isn't even that mad about it.

The next morning, she and Cat wake up extremely early, as usual, to go pick up Tori, Sam and Carly at Shadow Creek Park, then the group goes through the drive through at Jet Brew to order breakfast (though, with the amount of time it takes the fast-food joint to churn out enough food for three famished werewolves, one of whom is Sam, plus Jade and Cat, Jade wonders if they couldn't have just sat down at a diner somewhere where at *least* she would have unlimited coffee). They eat in the car on the way back to Tori's house, then say their goodbyes so that they can all go home and take showers and get ready for school later in the morning.

Except Jade isn't going home. She has everything she needs at Tori's, and the two of them take turns using Tori's shower. Once they're both clean, they have a moment to just lie down in bed and relax together before it's really time to get ready to leave for class.

"So, how was it?" Jade asks Tori as she snuggles up to Tori's shoulder.

Tori lets out a blissful sigh that would probably annoy Jade in any other circumstance. "It was *awesome*," she reports.

"You didn't feel left out this time?"

"Nope," Tori tells her happily. "It felt just like old times. It was even weirdly easy to forget that Sam and Carly are lovers, when we were wolves, anyway. It's...a little harder when we're human," she adds.

"Do I...want to know?"

"They're just sweet," Tori assesses, which makes Jade roll her eyes. "How's Cat?" Tori asks her.



“Actually, she seems to be doing a lot better,” Jade admits. “I can worry about her a lot less now.”

“Aww,” Tori croons.

“What?”

“It’s sweet when you worry about your friends.”

“You keep using that word to refer to people like me and Sam. I’m not sure you actually know the meaning.”

“No, you and Sam are just delusional,” Tori counters succinctly. “But that’s great to hear about Cat! She definitely seemed happier.”

“She is, I think. She mentioned something about feeling like Carly wants her and Sam together and how much that made her feel better.”

“Ah. Yeah. I think Sam and Carly might’ve mentioned that to me, too,” Tori says, suddenly sounding more grave.

“What does *that* mean?” Jade asks suspiciously.

“What did Cat tell you?”

“That she didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Makes sense,” Tori says quietly. “It sounds like she and Sam had a really bad fight, they even though they’d broken up, but Carly told Sam she needed to go back to Cat.”

“Wait. What?”

“That’s all that Sam would say,” Tori replies.

“Sam and Cat *broke up*?”

“Well, they *thought* they did, but it obviously didn’t—”

“A break up is a break up! If they both thought they broke up, they *did*!”

“Yeah, but considering they got right back together, I don’t think it really matters,” Tori says, her tone a little sharp.

Jade takes a breath, realizing that they’re getting a little heated. Sometimes she can see things a bit black and white, especially when it comes to relationships, which normally works for her because black is a great color and colors perform best when emphasized by contrast. Tori, for her part, tends to be a little more flexible. Even if Jade has strong feelings about what qualifies as a *real* breakup, she supposes it doesn’t matter in this instance. Even if Sam and Cat *did* break up for real, they’re clearly back together now. “Yeah. You’re right. I’m just surprised.”

“So was I. Especially the part about Carly helping to get them back together.”

“Yeah, what’s up with that? She could’ve had Sam all to herself.”

Tori shrugs underneath Jade’s head. “All she really said was that she knew that Cat made Sam happy and she wanted Sam to be happy.”

“Still...” Jade says skeptically.

“Maybe what they have is really, actually working for the three of them,” Tori says optimistically.

“Maybe so,” Jade answers doubtfully. “Look, I’m happy to be proven wrong about what a disaster I expected this to be within the first month. And I’m thrilled they’re all so happy. I’m still just...not sure about the long term.”

“Nobody’s ever sure about the long term of *anything*, Jade.”

“I’m sure about *you*,” Jade argues back forcefully.

They’re both quiet for a moment. Jade feels warmth on her cheeks when she realizes what she just said. She can’t see Tori’s face. Finally, Tori says, “You are?”

“You *aren’t*?” Jade challenges, feeling exposed.

“I didn’t say that,” Tori answers quietly. “I just didn’t know you felt so...”

“What, you thought I was just hanging around with you until someone better came along?” Jade snarks. She lifts her head to scowl at Tori. “What else could I do to let you know how serious I am about this?”

“I don’t know,” Tori answers quietly. Her dark eyes are bright, almost shimmering with intensity. “We just never talked about it.”

“Well,” Jade begins awkwardly, “look, I don’t even know what I’m suggesting here. I don’t have a ring for you, I didn’t plan this, and with everything my parents went through I don’t even really know how I feel about marriage anyway.” Maybe this isn’t the place to start, because Tori looks pale at the mere mention of marriage, so Jade presses on quickly. “Besides which, we’re too young. But I want us to be...long term. In it for the long haul. Playing the long game. However you want to say it, I want this—*us*—to be *it* for me.”

Tori’s eyes seem to be shimmering even more now. “I want that, too,” she answers quietly. “I just thought you were too...” She trails off.

“Too much a bitch? Too much of a hardass?”

“Too...*pragmatic*,” Tori settles on, “To think like that.”

“Well,” Jade says sharply. “I’m not.” She shakes her head. “When I think about my future, my long-term plans...they all have you in them.”

The tears in Tori's eyes spill over. "Me, too," she tells Jade, voice strained.

And then they're kissing, and Tori is laughing, and Jade snarls that there's nothing funny about this, but she's not being serious, not about the way she's teasing Tori, anyway.

She's being completely, 100% serious about the rest of it, however.

But Tori is right about one thing. Jade *is* pragmatic. Which is why she doesn't mention the other thing she sees in her future, in part because it seems so *stupid*.

Because Jade pictures these monthly trips to Shadow Creek Park as something in her future that will continue for a long, long time.

And that seems like more of a foolish wish than a realistic dream.

## Tranquility! Excellence

Although Cat didn't specifically ask to have the other two nights of the full moon with Sam, it works out that way. Probably because of school. Still, it's nice to have one night where Sam gets to just be a wolf at home, and they can snuggle and enjoy the dynamics of wolf-human companionship, and another night when she takes wolfsbane, and once their homework is finished, they have thrilling sex. Much like the sex they had over the weekend, it feels intensely connective and wild and *satisfying*.

Thursday is Sam's birthday, and though all their friends know it and send their best wishes, it's just not at a point in the semester when a party is going to be possible. Beck promises over text that they'll have a great party as soon as school is out, and they'll celebrate Sam then. Sam seems fine with it, though. Turning nineteen doesn't seem to feel like a big deal to her, but Cat still makes an attempt to make Sam feel special. She buys her a giant variety pack of a bunch of different varieties of unusual kinds of jerky (ostrich, elk, alligator, kangaroo) and makes her pasta with meatballs for dinner, one of her very favorites.

Earlier in the week, though, Sam had suggested she might want to go see Carly in the evening, and Cat happily obliges her to spend some time with her other girlfriend on her birthday. She wants Sam's day to be special, and for her to be able to do what she wants. Besides, she's supposed to be reading a five-act play for one of her classes, and she's a little behind, so she figures it will do her some good to dedicate her evening to making herself a cup of tea and sitting down with the text. Sometimes she thinks elderlies like Nona actually do know how to have a great evening.

But not long after the sound of Sam's motorcycle fades into the distance, there's a knock at her door.

"It's open!" she calls, glancing at the lock to check that it actually is.

The door opens, and Dice peeks his head around. "Hey," he says, almost stage-whispers, actually. "Is Sam here?"

"Nope, sorry, you just missed her!" Cat tells him apologetically. "She won't be back until later. Probably past your bedtime."

Dice draws himself up to his full height, which, now that puberty has started deepening his voice and broadening out his shoulders, is a little taller than Cat. "I don't have a bedtime!" he insists. "I'm about to start *high school*." His voice cracks a little on the word *high*.

"Yeah, but you're still in middle school right now." But Cat drops it when she sees the way Dice fumes. "I'll tell Sam you were looking for her. What's up? You didn't win another poker game, did you?"

Dice holds a hand up like he's taking an oath. "Trust me, my gambling days are behind me. I'm sticking to moving merchandise and managing talent!" He looks troubled suddenly.

“What’s wrong?” Cat asks.

“Look, I don’t know how to say this, but I’m not looking for Sam. I want to talk to you.”

“Oh, okay,” Cat finally puts a bookmark into the play she’s reading and pushes it aside, then stands up from the dining nook. “What do you want to talk about?” she asks, smoothing her dress and sitting down on the couch, gesturing to invite Dice to sit with her.

He doesn’t sit and instead paces. “I don’t know how to say this,” he repeats.

“You already said that,” Cat informs him, mildly impatient. “Maybe just say it?” she suggests.

Dice stops pacing and looks at Cat with soulful dark eyes. He’s wringing his hands. Cat starts to feel worried for the first time. Dice is a dramatic kid; she hadn’t been alarmed by his theatrics at first. But when she sees how he’s looking at her... “I saw Sam,” Dice says, but then presses his lips together and shakes his head.

Cat’s brow furrows. “You...saw Sam? Well, sure. We’re your neighbors.”

“No!” Dice shakes his head emphatically. “Sam is *cheating* on you!” he bursts out, his voice cracking dramatically on the most stunning word.

Cat stares uncomprehendingly. She’s so shocked she can’t even make sense of what Dice is saying. “What?” she asks.

He nods regretfully. “I *saw* her,” he insists. “It was *days* ago, and I didn’t know what to do about it, because Sam is *terrifying*, but I decided if it were me, I’d want to know.” He gives her the *saddest* look, then drops his gaze. “She was out in the parking area with this girl, and they were *kissing*.”

But almost immediately, Cat puts the pieces together, and she laughs. “Oh, she wasn’t cheating. She was with Carly!”

Dice brightens a bit and snaps his fingers. “You know, they were far away, but I *knew* she looked familiar!” But then his expression turns serious again. “I know they’re best friends, but what I saw was *not* a friendly kiss,” he tells Cat gently. “I’m really sorry,” he adds.

But Cat is shaking her head. “No, no, Dice, don’t worry, it’s okay! Sam is allowed to kiss Carly! She’s not cheating!”

He looks confused. “How can she be allowed to kiss Carly? She’s *your* girlfriend!”

Cat opens her mouth to explain, but then she remembers that despite the fact that he’s taller, and more grown up, she’s still talking to an adolescent boy. This won’t be easy, and there are parts of it he maybe doesn’t need to know. “It’s...complicated,” Cat settles on. “But I don’t want you to worry! You didn’t see anything that I don’t already know about, and what happened is completely okay with me!”

Dice doesn't look convinced. "That doesn't make any sense," he says flatly. "I know what I saw," he says fiercely. "And I know what people look like when they're trying to get away with something." He folds his arms like he just won the argument, but then his expression softens. "Cat, you're my friend, and this isn't okay. If you need a place to stay for a while, I'm sure my mom won't mind."

Cat is actually glad that Dice didn't approach her with this last month, when this might've been enough to get her to burst into tears. But instead, she's annoyed. Dice is a sweet kid, and he means well, but Cat is angry at the implication that Sam is *hurting* her. "No, you need to listen to me," she tells him sharply.

He looks shocked and he stands up straighter, like a schoolboy who just got disciplined by a teacher. Which, he *is* technically a schoolboy, Cat remembers. Dice is mature for his age, but he's *still* a kid, with a developing understanding of right and wrong, and fiery opinions about fairness and mistreatment. He just doesn't have enough information to understand that what's happening *isn't* Cat being unfairly mistreated.

Well, Cat supposes she'll have to give it to him. "I didn't want to tell you this because it's *personal*, but... Sam is in love with both me and Carly. So she has *two* girlfriends, and we're both okay with it. That's what I meant when I said it's okay she was kissing Carly. It's been going on for a while now and it's not a problem."

Dice stares. "*Two* girlfriends?" he asks. "You can *do* that?"

"Sure you can!" Cat giggles. "And if they both know, then it's okay!"

"I never would've even *thought* of that," Dice says, almost to himself, but then he looks back at Cat with concern. "Don't you get *jealous*?"

"Well, sure, sometimes we both do," Cat admits. Now that the truth is out, it's harder to stop talking, because it *is* an exciting topic, and Dice's eyes are wide with interest. "Like Carly gets jealous sometimes because Sam actually *lives* with me, and I get jealous because—" Her inclination is the truth of the fact that Carly was Sam's first, but the implications of *that* are not anything she wants to put into the head of a pubescent boy, so she quickly amends her statement to, "---they have such a long history together as friends, and they're both werew—" she cuts herself off, just barely resisting the urge to clap a hand over her mouth.

"They're both *what*?" Dice asks, looking confused.

"They're both... where they're both from, Seattle," Cat tries. "So they have a lot in common."

"Oh. Yeah. Right," Dice nods. He still looks like he's slowly processing everything he's hearing. "Wow," he finally says.

"This wasn't really something we wanted you to know, because it's kind of private and not all our friends know yet," Cat admits.

"I mean, I get it. It's kinda... unconventional, right?" He shakes his head. "Wow. *Two* girlfriends. And you just share her?"

Cat nods. "Sam is over hanging out with Carly now, in fact."

Dice's eyes widen. "*Oh!*"

"And I'm *fine*," Cat informs him, spreading her arms and smiling. "I really appreciate you looking out for me, Dice, but there's nothing to worry about! You're a good friend."

He smiles awkwardly and nods. "Yeah, well." He smooths his fluffy hair. "I couldn't just stand by if you were being hurt. Even if Sam could kill me with her bare hands."

Cat chuckles. "Yeah. She could," she states evenly. Dice looks alarmed, so she adds quickly, "But she wouldn't."

He doesn't look reassured, and his mouth twists slightly. "Can you make sure?" he asks.

-

Sam's birthday with Cat is incredible. As much as she tries to downplay her birthday at times, it's no secret that she wants the people close to her to celebrate her on that day, and both Cat and Carly understand that well.

Well, she assumes Carly does, because she hasn't gone to see her quite yet.

It's after dinnertime when she gets on her motorcycle to head to see Carly for the second part of celebrating her birthday with a girlfriend. When she parks in front of Carly's apartment, she pulls out her phone to text Carly that she's here, and then she notices that she'd missed a call while she was riding. From her sister.

Right. Melanie. They didn't always do very much for their birthday, but she at least usually remembered to text her sister. Maybe this year she'd been a little too focused on herself, a little too *selfish*.

She brushes the thought aside and calls her sister back.

"Hi, Sam," Melanie greets pleasantly.

"Hey. Sorry I missed your call. Um, happy birthday."

"Same to you!" Melanie replies.

Sam glances at her watch. "Isn't it kinda late there?"

Melanie laughs. "A little, I suppose. But I just got back to my dorm."

"What were you doing out so late? Studying?"

"For your information, I was at a party."

Sam wants to say that a party wouldn't end before eleven at night, but she always tries to be nicer to her sister on their birthday. "Are you drunk?" she asks her instead.

“Of course not!” Melanie replies, almost a scoff. “We played the newest *Settlers of Catan* expansion until we decided we really had to devote the rest of our night to homework.”

“I...don’t even know what that means, but, I hope you had fun?”

“Yeah,” Melanie says, almost wistful. “It was fun.”

There’s a pause, and Sam wonders what else there is to say. They’ve covered the purpose of the call, and Carly is waiting for her. “Well, don’t let me keep you from your studying.”

“Oh, before you go, I actually called because I have some news for you.”

Ho boy. She doesn’t even know what kind of “news” to expect from her sister. Their mom is in jail? She got her first B on a test and wants Sam’s advice for how to deal with failure? She’s engaged to some rich guy whose last name appears in high-society gossip columns? Something else Sam doesn’t care about? “What’s up?” she asks warily.

“I’m transferring schools next semester. I’ll be in northern California. This will be the closest we’ve lived to each other since we were kids!”

“Oh, hey, that’s cool,” Sam replies. “Kinda surprised, I thought you liked Boston.”

“I’m in New Haven,” Melanie reminds her.

“Right, sure.” Sam drove through both of those places on her motorcycle ride across America, but sometimes, in her memories, the cities blur together.

“And I *do* like it here, but...I think it’ll be better for me to be closer to you. Somewhere new, where it’ll take some time to find me.”

Sam realizes abruptly that she’s referring to their mother. “I won’t tell her where you are. I mean, I doubt she’s ever going to speak to me again anyway...”

“I’m not prepared to cut off contact with her fully yet,” Melanie explains quickly, “But I also don’t need her to know where I am such that she’ll try to *drop in*. Even being across the country from her, it hasn’t stopped her.”

That’s not at all surprising to Sam. “I’ll bet.” She considers the situation. “Maybe because of what happened with me, she won’t want to come to California, anyway.”

“I’m hoping so,” Melanie replies. “All right, Sam, well I’ll let you go. Enjoy the rest of your birthday.”

“Yeah. You, too.”

She’s happy for her sister, but honestly, Sam almost entirely forgets about this conversation once she goes up to Carly’s apartment, where there’s *more* food (fried chicken), *more* cake, and the sheets are already turned down on the bed, beckoning her.

It’s time to go back to being selfish on her birthday.



-

It's already been a great week, and Carly is looking forward to the weekend. She and Sam saw each other on Thursday night for Sam's birthday, which was great, and Sam had talked about maybe just casually hanging out this weekend, maybe with Cat, too. Of course, it's not the same as getting alone time with Sam (though she knows they both want to make sure that happens over the weekend, too), but at this point, Carly is happy with any plan that gives them more time together. And, honestly, Carly likes the idea of spending some more time with Cat, too. They had fun last weekend ganging up on Sam and teasing her for suffering through the play they all attended together. Rebuilding her friendship with Cat is important to Carly. Already, things feel so much more harmonious, which makes everything so much less stressful.

Friday afternoon, though, it isn't Sam who calls her, it's Cat, for the second week in a row.

"Hello?" Carly answers.

"Hi, Carly!" Cat greets excitedly, "How are you?"

"Pretty good. Heading home from school. How about you?"

"I'm great!" Cat exclaims. "Hey, so listen. Sam and I were trying to figure out something we could all do together and I suggested karaoke!"

"Ooh," Carly intones eagerly. "That would be really fun!"

"Yeah! That's what I said! We could go to Karaoke Dokie and bring the house down!"

"I still haven't been there, but I've heard you guys mention it."

"It's fun," Cat explains, "And you have *got* to try their buffalo nuggets!"

"Well, I'm in!" Carly says happily. "Where should we meet?"

"Great! But here's the thing. Sam doesn't want to go!"

"Oh." Carly's brow furrows. "Wait, why?"

"Because she says she doesn't think she wants to listen to a bunch of bad singers all night," Cat pouts.

"Let me talk to her," Carly demands.

"Okay," Cat says skeptically.

Dimly, Carly can hear muffled voices for a few seconds, before Sam answers, "Hey, Carls."

Carly gets right to the point. "Why aren't you coming to karaoke with us?"

"I'm just not into it," Sam grunts.

Carly frowns. “Come on, I’ve seen you at parties with our friends. You always have a good time.”

“Yeah, but, that’s because all of our friends can *sing*,” Sam insists. “Look, you’re not going to convince me. Jade took me to that place a while back, when we were getting to know each other. It was alright, the food was pretty good, but the singing? Ugh. Other than when me and Jade sang “Bring Me To Life” together, it was all *excruciating*.”

“You sang *that*?” Carly asks in surprise.

“Yeah,” Sam replies, like it’s no big deal.

Carly guesses that for the two of them, it probably wasn’t. Still, “I’m sorry I missed it.”

“We did sound *good*,” Sam admits. “But I’m just not feeling it. Maybe another time. You should go, though.”

“Just Cat and I?”

“Why not?”

It’s a good point. “Fine. I think I will.”

“Good. You’ll have a good time.”

“We’ll miss you though,” Carly tells her.

“Yeah, yeah. You’ll see me later.”

“I will?”

“Sure. Because you’re giving Cat a ride home.”

“Ah. Right,” Carly nods.

But Sam is right about something: Cat and Carly have a *great* time. Cat gets Goomer to drop her off at Carly’s, in another scenario reminiscent of last week, but unlike the trepidation the two of them still felt around each other the previous week, this Friday is all about fun. Carly drives them to Karaoke Dokie, while Cat tells her about a time in high school when she and Jade got banned and how they had Tori trick the establishment into hosting fairer competitions. Carly is impressed with their antics, and the detail of Tori’s false nose reminds her of her own trip to Los Angeles with Sam and Freddie, the first time she actually met Tori, and asks Cat how much she knows of that story. Cat has heard the story from Sam, but indulges Carly’s retelling, and they’re both feeling happy and comfortable as they head into Karaoke Dokie.

Quickly, Carly discovers that what she’s been told about the place is true: the buffalo nuggets are *delicious*, and the singing is...fine.

But ultimately, the singing doesn't bother her. She realizes as they head in that it's supposed to be an eighteen and under establishment (meaning she, herself, is technically too old to be here, but they don't check IDs at the door, and Carly doesn't volunteer her age), which contributes to the varying quality of the singers. She wonders if Sam realized that this was such a young crowd, but then considers that youth probably wouldn't prevent Sam and Jade from making fun of people mercilessly, anyway, so maybe it's moot. But she and Cat are a good audience. They clap and cheer for young singers whose nerves are clearly getting in the way of their performance, to encourage them, and offer polite applause to overly-confident singers who can't carry a tune while they exchange pained glances. Still, if they're not enraptured by the rare actual *good* singer, it gives them plenty of time to talk and hang out.

And when it's their turn to sing, and the options are somewhat limited, they choose to duet "Jolene", which, Carly releases halfway through the song, is kind of *hilarious*, because of their situation with Sam, and the way it is so completely *opposite* of what the song is about.

Cat's twinkling eyes meet hers, and she bites her lip to keep from laughing as Carly sings her line, and by the time they're finished singing and receive the crowd's enthusiastic applause, they're both laughing hysterically.

"I'm begging of you please don't take my man," Carly drawls with a twang as they head back to their seat, tone a genuine, tongue-in-cheek plea.

"Please don't take him even though you can!" Cat returns, her own delivery probably three times as dramatic as Carly's.

And they're doubling over with laughter over their buffalo nugget crumbs and mint-basil lemonade mocktails.

Moments later, their drinks are refreshed by their server, who tells them it's courtesy of "that table," and points.

Carly turns to look, and sees four guys nod at them confidently, then turns back to Cat, who looks ready to explode with laughter once again. "Should we *tell* them?" Carly asks.

"Of course not!" hisses Cat. "Let's just enjoy the free drinks!"

They do, and luckily, around when a couple of the guys get up the courage to approach them, they get up to perform their next song, so they have an excuse to avoid them. They sing and it feels like they've been practicing together *forever*, but somehow, all Carly has to do is look at Cat, or exchange a nod or two, and it's like they've found their own rhythm, their own flow, and they perform together as easy as breathing.

Or maybe that's just what it feels like from the rush of all the sugary mocktails they've had.

But they choose to sing "Wannabe" by the Spice Girls, which...maybe doesn't send the right message, because soon after they sit back down, the two guys are back. Carly scoots a little closer to Cat instinctively.

“Hey,” one says, offering a lazy grin. He’s the kind of guy Carly would’ve had a crush on in high school: cute, blond, broad-shouldered, and, *yeah*, definitely still in high school. “You guys were really good up there.”

“Thank you,” Cat answers. Carly glances at her; she’s smiling politely, but the guy gets the kind of smug grin on his face that suggests he thinks she just offered to blow him.

The other guy is a bit skinnier, but taller, and he smiles awkwardly at Carly. “You’re both really talented,” he comments, though it’s clear he’s addressing her.

“Thank you,” Carly answers, echoing Cat. The guy looks relieved, like this is already going better than he expected.

The blond guy still looks smug as he zeros in on Cat. “Mind if we join you? My name’s Sam.”

Carly presses her lips together hard and looks over at Cat, who meets her gaze with her own eyes dancing with mirth, and within a second, the two of them are howling with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” the first guy asks, bewildered.

“What did you say?” the second guy wonders.

They stand, bewildered, staring as Cat and Carly lose themselves laughing at this poor boy’s name. Just as the blond guy nudges his friend back toward the table, Carly gets control of herself. “S-sorry,” she manages. “We just...know a Sam,” she explains.

“Oh. Right.” The blond guy looks a little grumpy now.

“I’m Fred,” the other guy offers, wincing like he expects that *his* name is going to set them off, too. *Oh, lord*. Carly manages to hold back her laughter, and pokes Cat when she hears a light snort. “Um, can we buy you another drink?” Fred asks.

“Um...n-no,” Cat manages.

“Oh.”

“Sorry,” Carly offers. “We just...” She tries to think of how to let them down easily.

“We just...prefer each *other’s* company,” Cat lilts, arm circling Carly’s shoulder.

Well. It isn’t *untrue*. “Yeah. That,” Carly adds unnecessarily, feeling her face heat up.

“Ohhh,” boy-Sam nods. He nudges Fred harder. “We’re totally barking up the wrong tree, man,” he tells him. “Sorry to bother you ladies,” he adds, as he steers Fred away.

“Thank you for the drinks!” Cat calls after him.

“Hey, thanks for not sucking up there,” boy-Sam answers with a weak smile.

“Oh my god I can’t believe that happened,” Carly says in a rush, turning toward Cat so she doesn’t have to face the table of guys who are all crowding close together to hear what happened.

“What? Don’t you get hit on out in public?” Cat asks in surprise.

“I mean, sure, sometimes,” Carly answers. “But not usually...like that.”

Cat hums thoughtfully. “You’re so pretty you probably intimidate most guys,” she suggests.

“Oh, come on,” Carly shakes her head.

But Cat is looking past her surreptitiously. “Those guys all think we’re gay, don’t they?” she asks rhetorically.

“That...is what you led them to believe,” Carly says hesitantly. “Also, they’re not *completely* wrong.”

“Nope,” Cat giggles. “Too bad they won’t get a show from us,” she winks.

“Except onstage,” Carly mumbles, nearly stumbling over her words. “Should we do one more song?” she suggests half-heartedly.

“Actually, I’m probably good to go if you are,” Cat shrugs.

Gratefully, Carly agrees. It’s been a fun night, but the interaction with those guys is making her feel *awkward* and *scrutinized*.

It’s weird to think that she’s been seen as someone out in public with her girlfriend when she’s been with *Cat*, but that still really hasn’t happened when she’s been with *Sam*.

As she and Cat leave, they have to walk past the table of high school guys, and boy-Sam catches Carly’s eye and gives her a discreet thumbs up. Carly offers a wan smile in return and, keeping up with appearances even though there’s literally no reason to, she puts an arm around Cat’s waist.

She and Cat laugh a little bit about the guys on the way back to Cat’s apartment, but soon turn to the radio. They sing along, but having sung karaoke a few times already tonight, they’re a little less enthusiastic than the last time they sang to the radio together.

Carly supposes she should be flattered that people thought she and Cat could be a couple, and that someone applauded her taste in women...except that Cat *isn’t* her taste in women. Cat’s beautiful, and sweet, and there are so many things Carly admires about her, but...they aren’t in love.

Still, every time Cat’s doe eyes meet hers as they laugh or sing something together, Carly feels like she’s blushing again.

Maybe this is just a clue that she and Sam need to go out on a date together. Like a real, actual *date* date where people *know* it’s a date so that they can feel like a real couple.

Yeah. Carly thinks that would probably be really nice.

When they make it back to the apartment, Cat makes a big show of making some dinner, since the buffalo nuggets they split were really more of a snack, and winks at Sam while she suggests that she might want to show Carly the art project she's been working on in the bedroom. Sam starts to say she can just bring it up front when she catches on and, giving Cat an astonished and grateful look, invites Carly to follow her to the bedroom.

Once inside, they almost immediately start making out. And it gets...intense, quickly.

"Whoa," Sam chuckles as Carly pushes her onto her bed.

"Sorry," Carly breathes, taking a moment to catch her breath. "You just look...*really* good."

"I'm in sweatpants," Sam answers, amused.

"Don't care," Carly growls, climbing up onto Sam's bed.

"Hey, hey," Sam puts a hand on Carly's shoulder to urge her to slow down. "Not that I'm not *really* into this, but I don't want Cat to...hear anything..."

They both go unnaturally still as they listen, and it quickly becomes clear that Cat is quietly singing in the kitchen. From the precise rhythm of the song, which Carly recognizes, she says, "You know, I bet she's wearing headphones."

"I think so, too," Sam agrees. "Still, I don't want to do anything that would, like...upset this balance we have right now."

"I'm not suggesting we *fuck* right now," Carly tells hers. From the way Sam's eyes flash, she can't resist adding, "Unless..."

"No, no no," Sam bites her lip. "*Fuck*, I wish. Just kiss me for a little longer. Then we'll go up front."

"Shut up so I *can* kiss you," Carly orders, then connects their mouths again. But as she kisses Sam, enthusiastically and joyfully, her thoughts begin to drift to her night at the karaoke club, and after a few minutes, she's the one who pulls away and says, "Actually, I need to talk to you."

"You want to talk *now*?" Sam asks, sounding dazed and blinking bleary eyes.

"Yeah. It's about something that happened tonight."

"Uh oh," Sam frowns.

"It's nothing bad," Carly assures her. "Just weird. Some guys were hitting on Cat and I—"

"*Gross*," Sam says emphatically.

Carly ignores the outburst. “And to get them off our backs we let them think *we* were a couple.”

Sam looks *very* interested. “Okay, that’s kinda hot.”

“Focus,” Carly shoves her shoulder. “But it made me realize, I’ve been in public with *Cat* where people thought I was dating her, but I still haven’t had that with *you*.”

“Oh. Ah. Yeah,” Sam utters, frowning slightly. “Yeah, that’s—”

“Can we go out? Maybe tomorrow?”

Sam nods. “Yeah, of course. Let’s go out and this time...let’s make sure it’s in a way where people will *know* we’re together.”

“Good,” Carly grins. She pauses to listen to Cat singing in the kitchen. “You think she’s going to come looking for us soon?”

“I doubt it, but with her, you never know.” Sam nudges Carly to prompt her to get off the bed. “Come on, let’s go see how soon dinner is.”

-

Sam is kinda worked up from that makeout session with Carly, which eventually leads to sex with Cat later in the evening, after they all eat dinner and Carly goes home. Afterwards, she tells Cat about her plan to go out with Carly tomorrow and to publicly be a couple with her.

“I think that’s a great idea,” Cat says.

“I know you kind of wanted to keep it private at first,” Sam says hesitantly. “I figure, in a city this big, there’s such a slim chance anyone we know will see us...”

“Oh. That reminds me. Dice knows.”

“Dice—what do you *mean* Dice knows?!” Sam explodes.

“He saw you and Carly kissing when you walked her back to her car last week. He thought you were cheating on me and wanted to tell me.”

“I’m gonna wring his little—”

“No, you won’t!” Cat glares at her. Sam falls silent. “He was trying to do the right thing. Even if he is a nosy little so-and-so...”

Sam sighs. “Okay. So I guess the cat is out of the bag there.”

Cat giggles. “Cat,” she repeats happily.

“So then it’s really only the rest of your high school friends who don’t know, huh?”

Cat nods. “Unless Andre found out somehow. He is pretty close with Tori and Carly.”

“Yeah, but I think we’d know if he knew.” Sam considers this. “Should we just...tell them?”

“I’d rather at least tell Robbie in person,” Cat says hesitantly. “Because I know he’ll have a lot of questions.”

“Which would mean most likely telling Beck in person, too,” Sam considers.

“The semester is almost over, and I’ll bet Beck will throw a party. We can just tell them then.”

Sam nods. “Well. If anyone calls you because they see me out with Carly...sorry in advance,” she says awkwardly.

Cat giggles. “It’s fine. I know how to deal with it now.”

The next day, Sam rides over to Carly’s in the early afternoon. Carly is waiting for her at the door to her apartment building, and her eyes land on Sam’s red checkered backpack. “Oh,” she drawls, “What’s in there?”

“It’s for where we’re going,” Sam tells her. “And you’ll have to wear it when you get on the bike.”

“So I guess you’re driving,” Carly comments as she approaches Sam and her motorcycle.

“I am the one who knows where we’re going,” Sam points out.

“True.” Carly takes the red checkered backpack first and smiles fondly as she turns it over in her hands. “Where *are* we going?” she asks.

“On a date,” Sam answers, holding out a helmet to her.

“A very *cryptic* date,” Carly comments, putting the backpack on her back so she can take the helmet.

Sam frowns. “I hadn’t thought of a cemetery, but that might work.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Carly laughs as she puts on the helmet. She frowns a little as she secures it around her chin. “What kind of date would you have in a *cemetery*?” she asks worriedly.

“I don’t know. You can walk around and there’s flowers and stuff. Seems romantic enough for me.”

Sam is only being partly serious, but Carly gives her a heavy side-eye as she straddles the back of the motorcycle and wraps her arms around Sam’s waist. “Well, I guess if we *are* going to a cemetery, at least I’m mentally prepared.”

Now Sam almost *does* wish they were. But instead she roars off into traffic and drives them to her original destination.



Which turns out to be the same park with the dog park she took Cat to weeks ago. Except they're not going to the dog park. Or, well, maybe that could be fun, but it's not the point of the trip.

"We're at the park?" Carly asks as Sam pulls her bike into a space in the little parking lot. She seems grateful to get off the motorcycle.

"Yeah." Sam takes the backpack from Carly. "Come on," she urges. After a moment, she reaches to take Carly's hand.

Carly visibly hesitates, but then reaches to slip her hand into Sam's.

Sam grins as they walk a little way into the park. Even though she and Cat walk around touching very frequently, it's different with Carly. They've been running on the instinct to try to mask their involvement with each other, which makes small public gestures like this feel huge, and kind of invigorating.

Sam selects a spot of grass, and looks around. It's afternoon on a Saturday, so the park is busy, but not so crowded that they can't have a bit of privacy. Most of the action is over at the playground, where parents watch their kids play, or the dog park, or just people walking or running around on the sidewalks. There's a family grilling hot dogs on one of the public grills, people in line for sodas and ice pops at someone's little makeshift stand, and some kids kicking around a soccer ball, but this patch of grass is mostly out of the way, though still very public.

"Here we are," Sam says, gesturing grandly.

Carly looks around. "The park?" she says again, sounding skeptical.

"Yeah." Sam kneels down and unzips her backpack. "We're going to have a picnic," she informs Carly, pulling out an old blanket she found in the hall closet and trying to shake it out to land straight on the grass.

It kind of lands in a heap. Carly's lip twitches as she grabs the other end to pull it tight. "Don't you need food for a picnic?" she asks as she settles onto one end of the blanket, keeping her shoes in the grass.

Sam gives her a wounded look. "Do you really think I'd forget *food*?"

Carly laughs. "Okay, you're right, stupid question." She rubs her hands over her jean-clad knees. "Sorry, this is still...weirder than I expected."

"To go on a picnic?" Sam asks.

"To go on a picnic with *you*," Carly admits. "It still kinda feels like I have to treat it like a joke a little bit, so no one gets the wrong idea."

It doesn't exactly feel *good* to hear, but Sam understands it. "Yeah, I know what you mean. That's kinda why I thought we'd start with this. We did dinner, we did the movies, but those are things where it's easy to pretend we're just friends. A picnic is..."

“More romantic?” Carly suggests, batting her eyes a little.

Sam grins. “It’s kind of a given, isn’t it?”

“It’s a good choice,” Carly admits. “It’s probably exactly why it’s a bit of a challenge.”

“Well, I also thought it might be good because like, people will leave us alone. We can be together, be obviously a couple, and I doubt we’ll have to talk to anybody.”

“That’s another good point.” Carly gives her a smile. “How long did it take you to think of it?”

“Oh, I thought of it right away. It’s something Cat likes to do, so…” she trails off. It *still* feels weird bringing up her other girlfriend on dates.

But Carly doesn’t appear to mind. In fact, she nods knowingly. “Cat suggested it, didn’t she?” she guesses.

“No,” Sam insists, glaring. “Trust me, kid, this was all me.” She digs into her bag again. “Anyway, I’ve got sandwiches, apples, chips, cookies, and a couple of Blue Dog sodas,” she says proudly, pulling out the food and spreading it out on the blanket.

“Wow,” Carly comments. “You weren’t kidding when you said to save room for lunch.”

“I had to pack kinda light,” Sam explains, before realizing Carly is insinuating that this is a *big* lunch.

“It looks great,” Carly grins, and picks up a sandwich. Sam picks up her own and starts eating. She surreptitiously watches the people around them. No one seems to be paying them any attention. That’s good, probably. They aren’t here to get *stared* at, just to be…public.

Maybe they should sit closer. Right now they’re kinda sitting on either side of the blanket to hold it down, keeping their feet on the grass. Sam puts down her sandwich to tug her boots off, using them and the backpack to weigh down one side of the blanket, and sits more toward the center, closer to Carly.

Carly sees what she’s done and takes off her sneakers so she can join Sam in the middle of the blanket, too. They smile at each other as they sit close and enjoy their sandwiches together. Well, Sam is enjoying hers. Carly is peering between the sandwich layers. “Did you make these?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Sam says. She wasn’t about to have Cat make food for her picnic date with Carly.

“I can tell,” Carly says dryly. She fully opens the sandwich onto its plastic bag on the picnic blanket. “How many kinds of meat are in here?”

“Ummm.” Sam mentally tallies them. “There’s, uh. Chicken breast. Steak slices. Bacon. Turkey. Roast beef. Salami. And canned ham.”

“Good lord,” Carly mutters. “Okay, you want my chicken, steak and canned ham?” she asks.

“Those are the *best part*,” Sam groans.

“They’re also cut *thick* and I’m not going to be able to eat this sandwich! At least the rest is lunchmeat.”

“Sure, fine, I’ll take your extra meat,” Sam sighs, like it’s a huge hassle.

Carly narrows her eyes as she starts passing over little slabs of meat. “You did this on purpose, didn’t you?”

“What?” Sam asks innocently.

“Overstuffed a sandwich so I’d give you half of it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sam says blandly, then takes a big bite of her own oversized sandwich.

Carly shakes her head and smiles and puts her sandwich back together. With the deli meats, cheese, lettuce, tomato, onions, and pickles, it’s at least a relatively manageable size. “This is really good,” Carly admits.

“I made the sauce myself,” Sam says proudly.

“What is it?”

“A secret.”

“You have your own *secret* sauce?”

“Sure.” Sam takes another bite, then explains after she finishes it. “It took a while to narrow down the recipe and decide which condiments went in it instead of *all* of them, but I did it.”

“All of them?” Carly asks, looking a little green.

“Yeah, that was a mistake,” Sam admits.

They sit and eat their lunch together on their picnic blanket, idly chatting, and it’s pretty easy to forget they’re somewhere public. Still, all they’re doing is sitting and eating. Maybe it would be easy to assume they’re just friends.

Sam is considering this notion as they finish their food and stuff their trash into the plastic bag Sam brought. Carly watches her curiously, then asks, “Do you think people here even realize we’re on a date?”

“I was just thinking that,” Sam admits. “What should we do to—mmph.”

Carly kisses her, right there on the picnic blanket. It isn’t a very long kiss, or very passionate, but it’s very direct, and there’s no mistaking its intention. “Think they know *now*?” Carly asks with a smirk.

“I don’t know,” Sam says thoughtfully. “Maybe we should do it again.”

They trade lazy kisses on their picnic blanket, and eventually recline back to look at the palm tree fronds against the cloudy sky. It’s peaceful, no one bothers them, and it feels like an important first step to figuring out their public relationship.

At least until an earwig crawls onto Carly’s arm. That kind of ruins the mood.

“Maybe we should go back,” Carly suggests. She’d sprung to her feet unnaturally quickly after realizing there was a bug on her, and has been brushing at her clothes restlessly for the past several seconds.

“Yeah, okay. This is over,” Sam agrees.

“I had a great time at least until the earwig tried to make it a threesome,” Carly tells her as they repack the backpack.

“Me, too,” Sam smiles. She pulls Carly in for a final kiss before they head back toward her motorcycle, by way of a trash can so they can throw out the remnants of their lunch.

It’s the kind of good experience that Sam wants to go home and tell Cat about. But it feels like something she shouldn’t share. Should she?

In the end, she asks Cat if she wants to hear about it. Cat does, and eagerly listens as Sam relays the date and why it was important to them, and Cat is thrilled for them both.

Sam feels lucky and genuinely treasured by both Carly *and* Cat.

She hopes the feeling never fades.

-

Cat and Sam enjoy a date of their own on Sunday, in which they go to the arcade at Santa Monica and finally earn enough tickets to get Cat the kitten stuffed animal she’s had her eye on for so long. Sam mentally does the math as they walk back to the motorcycle, and admits to Cat that she probably doesn’t want to know how much it actually caught to “buy” the little plush creature, and Cat agrees that she doesn’t need to think about that part.

“I had fun with you earning the tickets!” she tells Sam, hugging the stuffed kitten to her chest. “And that’s what matters.”

“Exactly,” Sam smiles.

The semester is nearing its end, though for Cat, it’s oddly less stressful than the previous month was. Probably because the previous month involved a lot of papers and projects and most of what Cat has to work toward right now are finals, and just one final project in her theater class. Finals are stressful, sure, but Cat also feels like she’s been preparing for them all semester, and not like she’s completely behind, so her studying feels more like refreshing herself on things she’s already familiar with rather than starting something big from scratch. Projects are easier for her to manage when they don’t feel enormous.

Sam, on the other hand, has several big art projects due just as the semester ends, so she's feeling the pressure a little more. But in typical Sam fashion, she also shrugs and says if she doesn't finish something on time, she won't finish it on time. If she has to take a class over again, it's no big deal, because she won't be working on the exact same projects when she takes it over again, and she'll just do what she wants of the classwork. Still, Cat can tell that Sam is *trying* to finish all her work, that a part of Sam *cares* about completing her classes and at least passing, if only so she hasn't wasted money paying for school (even if it's technically Cat's father's money, Sam is pretty frugal by nature).

In the middle of the week, though, she gets a call from Carly. "Hey, Carly!" Cat answers cheerfully. It's afternoon, and she and Sam are at home; Sam is across the room working on a painting and she perks up curiously at the sound of Carly's name.

"Hi, Cat!" Carly says. "Um, this might sound kind of weird, but...Okay, let me start from the beginning."

"Okay," Cat answers, settling into her seat and putting down her pencil. She glances at Sam, who is still watching her, and shrugs.

"So, I'm taking this psychology class with Tori and Andre and for this last paper I'm supposed to interview someone over sixty-five," she starts. Cat hums to show she's listening, and Carly continues, "And at first I thought, easy, I'll interview my grandfather! But he lives in Washington and then I found out it *has* to be in person, because we're also supposed to take note of things like mannerisms and my professor didn't think even a video call would be suitable for that kind of detail."

"Oh, that's too bad. What are you going to do?" Cat asks.

"Well..." Carly says slowly, "Andre is already interviewing his grandmother, and he said he didn't think his great-grandfather would work for me because he's...not all there anymore. Tori's only living grandma has been on a European vacation all semester with some man, and Jade doesn't talk to half her grandparents and the others aren't local, so Tori is already planning to interview Robbie's grandma."

"Poor Tori," Cat laments.

"That's what I hear," Carly sighs. "But that leaves me, um. Tori suggested I might interview your grandma?"

"My Nona?" Cat asks, surprised. "Well, sure! She'd probably love to talk to you!"

"Really? Oh, that's great." Carly sounds relieved. "I hate to put you on the spot, but I'd really like to get it done as soon as possible."

She doesn't *say* it directly, but Cat realizes she means she wants to do it *today*, if possible. "I can call my Nona right now and see if we can meet her tonight," Cat suggests.

"That would be *perfect*," Carly sighs gratefully. "Oh my gosh. Thank you so much! I don't know what I would have done without you."

Cat laughs. “You’d be fine. All you’d have to do is walk into Elderly Acres and I’m sure some elderly would start telling you their life story!”

“I guess,” Carly says, sounding skeptical. “Okay, just let me know!”

Cat calls Nona right away, and she is thrilled at the idea of a visitor. Carly arrives at their apartment so they can head to Elderly Acres together.

“You two have fun,” Sam tells them snidely.

“You aren’t coming?” Carly asks, surprised.

“It’d be better if I don’t,” is all Sam says.

“Okay...” Carly narrows her eyes at her, but Sam gives Cat and Carly each a kiss goodbye as they head out to where Carly parked her car.

“Don’t tell Sam, but Nona will probably feed us while we’re there,” Cat informs Carly happily.

“Why isn’t she coming, really?” Carly asks as she gets into the driver’s seat, then leans over to unlock Cat’s door.

“They’ve just never gotten along,” Cat says succinctly. “My Nona can be... a lot,” she admits, wincing a little as she says it. It’s honest, but it still feels wrong to actually say aloud.

“In what way?” Carly asks warily.

“Let’s just say you’ll probably have *plenty* of material for your interview,” Cat replies cheerfully.

“Oh, boy,” Carly mumbles bracingly.

Cat guides Carly to Elderly Acres, and when they enter together, Nona is standing among some friends who are all lining up to get...body piercings. Cat always wonders who is in charge of entertainment around here.

“Oh, hi!” Nona greets, coming over to them. “Oh, you must be Cat’s friend.” She smiles at Carly.

“I’m Carly. It’s nice to meet you!” Carly says very politely, offering a hand to shake.

Nona slaps the hand as if she thinks Carly is offering a high-five instead. “Oh, aren’t you cute,” she chuckles.

“Nona, are you getting a piercing?” Cat asks, mildly concerned.

“Oh, I was thinking about it, but they’ll be back in a couple of months,” Nona replies airily.

“What were you going to get?” Cat asks, but Nona either doesn’t hear her or *pretends* not to hear her as she begins to guide Cat and Carly to her room. She exchanges an awkward glance with Carly.

“So, Cat mentioned you need me to help you with some school project?” Nona says as they settle onto chairs in her living room area.

“Yeah, um. I’m supposed to interview someone over, uh, I’m supposed to interview you,” Carly says. “If that’s okay.”

“Oh, I’ve been interviewed *many* times!” Nona replies confidently.

“That’s great! What kinds of things have you been interviewed about?” Carly asks.

“Oh, well, you know. When I was *younger*, sometimes when you know people and people know you know people, they want to know what you know, you know?” She winks.

“Uhh.” Carly glances uncertainly at Cat. “I see.” She shifts in her seat. “Um, well, are you ready to get started? I have a list of questions here.”

“Sure!” Nona replies, smiling easily and giving Carly her attention.

Cat hadn’t really known what to expect, but Carly starts out asking Nona some questions about her childhood. Cat is embarrassed and a little bit astonished to realize that this isn’t something she ever thought much about. Nona has always just been...*Nona*. It seems almost wrong to imagine her as a little girl. Cat has seen a few pictures here and there, of Nona as a young woman, but she never considered much what Nona’s childhood must’ve been like.

Nona tells Carly that she and her siblings were the first American-born members of her family; both sets of her grandparents had emigrated from Italy when her parents were very young children, but her parents had both been born in Italy. They’d settled in New Jersey, and her parents had grown up knowing each other, and ended up marrying soon after high school.

But Nona’s parents hadn’t stayed in New Jersey; they’d ended up moving to Georgia and Nona and her siblings grew up there. But they visited New Jersey a lot growing up, because all her grandparents and other extended family lived there.

“My parents grew up speaking Italian at home, but they didn’t speak it in our household very much,” she says wistfully. “I always regretted that a little. My grandparents knew enough English to get by. They had to learn, because of how anti-Italian things were after they came here because of the war. But I can remember times when they’d switch to Italian to talk to each other or to my parents and wishing I knew what they were saying.” She shakes her head. “I can remember a few phrases here and there, but nothing else.”

“I just spent a year in Italy, in Florence,” Carly offers. “It’s such a beautiful, expressive language.”

“Did you?” Nona says eagerly. “I visited years ago, when Cat’s grandfather was still alive, and oh, we had the best time,” she says fondly. Cat can see the way her grandmother looks

off at nothing, clearly lost in memories for a moment, then she turns back to Carly. “He was like me, Italian family, but he grew up closer to family members who spoke the language, so he knew a little more. We always talked about how he could help teach me, but it just never happened,” she says sadly.

“I learned so much, but even now, a year later, I feel like I’m forgetting a lot,” Carly admits.

“I remember one phrase, oh what was it,” Nona frowns. “*Mi chiamo Paulette, come si chiama?*”

“*Molto bene!*” Carly replies.

“Oh my gosh I think I understood that!” Cat announces excitedly.

“I’m afraid I can’t remember much else,” Nona says regretfully.

“That’s okay,” Carly chuckles. “I can’t really hear the language without missing the food over there.”

“Oh!” Nona perks up. “Now that’s something I *did* learn.”

“Italian cooking?” Carly asks, clearly intrigued.

Nona nods. “I have a whole book of recipes, from both sides of my family.” She smiles fondly at Cat. “I’ve shared some of them with Cat already.”

“Nona is *really* good,” Cat informs Carly seriously.

“I’ve had your cooking, Cat, so I believe it,” Carly replies.

“It’s getting close to dinnertime, isn’t it?” Nona says conversationally. “Why don’t I show you both how to make my pesto pasta?”

Carly glances excitedly at Cat. “That sounds great!”

“I *love* your pesto sauce!” Cat groans, already rubbing her stomach. Under her breath, as Nona goes to her kitchen to check her ingredients, she says to Carly. “We *can’t* tell Sam about this.”

“Absolutely not,” Carly agrees.

In the end, Carly continues conducting the interview while Nona prepares dinner, constantly flipping pages in her notebook to take notes on the recipe and the interview simultaneously. Cat offers help with preparing the ingredients to help Nona focus on the interview. It seems to go well, despite a plethora of weird tangents Nona takes them on, and by the time Carly finishes her list of questions, Nona is combining her freshly prepared pesto sauce with hot pasta noodles and placing each dish at her little dining room table.

It’s as good as it always is. Cat absolutely wants to try her hand at making it herself, as soon as possible.



“Oh, wow,” Carly says around a mouthful of noodles. She swallows, then adds, “This is the best thing I’ve eaten since I’ve come back to the States.” She glances at Cat. “No offense,” she adds.

“None taken,” Cat assures her. “I’ve learned a lot from Nona, but I’m not her.”

“Oh, there’s always more to teach you,” Nona tells her airily. “Any time you want to come by!”

Cat looks over at Carly, who looks back at her eagerly. “Do you think,” Carly begins hesitantly, “That I might be able to come learn more, too?”

“Oh, but of course! You’re someone who can truly appreciate it,” Nona smiles.

Afterwards, there are leftovers, which Nona insists on sending home with them. She and Carly debate what to do with them on the way back to Carly’s car, mostly whether Sam deserves them or not.

“I don’t get it,” Carly says as they get back into her little VW. “*Why* doesn’t Sam like your Nona?”

Cat shrugs. “I think they just got off on the wrong foot. Nona *did* accidentally close Sam up in the old fold-out couch the first night Sam slept at the apartment.”

“What?” Carly asks, horrified.

“She sleepwalks,” Cat explains. “It seems to be kind of mutual,” she admits. “They just don’t get along. Though Sam never really says no to her cooking.” She looks down at the plastic container of noodles in her lap. “She’ll love this,” she admits.

“Fine, she can have it,” Carly waves it off. “I guess she’s probably not that interested in learning how to cook things like this, anyway.”

“Sam is more interested in the *end* of cooking,” Cat replies.

Carly laughs. “That’s the truth.”

-

Already, Carly has more to look forward to once school ends. Not just more time with Sam, but more time with Cat and, shockingly, more time with Cat’s grandmother.

The adults in Carly’s life have always been a bit hit or miss. Her father, who she idolized, who she spent a year living with and still felt like she barely got to know him at all, who feels more like a mythical figure than a *dad*. Her grandfather, who is loving and sweet and funny but who tried to take her away from Spencer, and from all her friends. A part of Carly had never quite forgiven him for that, even though, now that she’s older, she can understand exactly why he’d worried about her living with just Spencer (it says something that even now, Spencer doesn’t feel like an “adult” in her life). But for a vulnerable just-turned-

teenaged girl, the thought of being taken from everything she knew had been devastating and very frightening.

Cat's Nona is funny, charming and, yes, very, *very* chatty, though that had been great when Carly was trying to interview her. It's clear that her storytelling can be too much sometimes, as Cat tells her, but Carly is interested to get to know the old woman better, and to learn from her.

It's the very beginning of May, at the end of the school week, and Carly is at home, on her computer, trying to finish a History paper, when she gets a call from Spencer; they stay in touch pretty consistently, but usually through text, so it's a bit unusual.

"Hello?" she answers a bit worriedly, half-expecting to find out it's someone else using Spencer's phone, maybe to tell her the old apartment burned down in a fire or something.

"Carly! It worked!" Spencer crows through the phone.

"Oh, hi! Um, what worked?" she asks.

"That job you put in for me! I just got a call from Hollywood Arts, and they want to commission me for a sculpture!"

"Oh my god! Spencer! That's so great!" Carly exclaims, but after a moment, the other part of what he says sinks in. "Wait a minute. I didn't put in any job for you."

"You didn't?" he asks, sounding surprised. "I just figured...you in Los Angeles, and this school being down there..." He trails off.

"Nope. It wasn't me," Carly informs him. But quickly, she decides, "You know what, I bet it was Sam!"

"I'll bet you're right!" Spencer agrees. "She always did like me," he says fondly.

Carly rolls her eyes. "Yeah, yeah," she answers.

"Hey, will you thank her for me?" Spencer asks. "I don't want to bother her." Carly knows they haven't really been in touch much since Sam left Seattle, partly because of her, and Spencer awkwardly having to be a go-between for her and Sam a few times.

"Sure, I can do that," Carly agrees. "Spencer, I'm *so proud* of you! I can't wait for you to come to LA!"

"Me neither!" he cries excitedly. "I have *so* many ideas, I have to start sketching them out now!"

"Have fun!" Carly tells him.

She considers calling Sam, but what she really wants is to thank her in person, so she sticks with just sending a text, for now.

**Thank you for being great <3**

She figures just in case Sam heard something, too, there will at least be some acknowledgement from Carly.

**You're welcome?**

Sam's reply doesn't reveal much, but it makes Carly smile.

The next day, Saturday, they have planned one last hurrah before the very end of the semester; Jade's finals week is next week, while the other four girls' schools have finals week the following week. Jade invited them all to her favorite art house movie theater to see a double feature of *Lost Highway* and *Wild at Heart* (she'd excluded inviting the guys, evidently because she didn't want to be subjected to Beck's long-winded opinions about Nicolas Cage's acting). Sam and Cat come to Carly's apartment to meet up and eat some dinner before they drive as a group to meet Tori and Jade at the cinema.

Carly lets them into her apartment, and as Cat takes the bag of Mexican takeout to Carly's kitchen to unpack it, Carly hugs Sam and kisses her, a little bit longer and more passionately than she usually kisses her around Cat. "Thank you," she tells her genuinely.

Sam laughs a little awkwardly. "We just brought dinner, it's not that big a deal," she brushes Carly off and starts heading over toward Cat.

Carly stops her with a hand on her arm. "No, I meant. Thank you for what you did for Spencer."

Sam tilts her head to the side. "What did I do to Spencer?" she asks, looking bewildered.

"You—wait, you weren't the one who put his name to make a sculpture at Hollywood Arts?" Carly asks, mildly incredulous.

Sam shakes her head and Carly can see she's opening her mouth to verbally refute Carly's assumption, when Cat's voice breaks in, "Ooh, did he get it?" she asks excitedly.

"Wait." Carly turns to Cat. "You know about this?" And then it hits her. "Did *you* submit Spencer's name?!" she asks in shock.

"Yeah!" Cat answers happily. "That's my old high school!"

"No, I know that, I just thought—I didn't realize—I know Sam used to hang out there and I figured—oh my god, Cat, thank you!"

As Carly moves to give Cat a hug, Sam asks suggestively, “You gonna thank her like you thanked me?”

“*Sam!*” Cat scolds, pulling away from Carly almost as soon as the hug starts.

“Yeah, that ruined it,” Carly agrees quickly, taking a step back and turning to glare at Sam a little. But she turns back to Cat after a moment. “But seriously, *thank you*. He’s so excited!”

“I’m so glad!” Cat enthuses. “A benefactor wanted to sponsor a sculpture memorializing a former art teacher, and they usually try to pull from Hollywood Arts alumni for this kind of thing, but they were having trouble finding someone whose style matched what the benefactor wanted, so they opened up the search about a month ago. I remembered seeing the kinds of things Spencer made back on your webshow and I thought he’d be a great fit, and I was right!”

“That’s so cool!” Carly gushes, and she can’t resist the impulse to give Cat another hug, this one uninterrupted by Sam. “Seriously, thank you so much. This is such a good opportunity for him!”

“I hope it all works out!”

Sam, meanwhile, has pushed past the two of them and already started on her Mexican food. “It’s still hot,” she prompts them both.

“Yeah, yeah,” Carly tells her.

As they eat, Carly considers the notion that Cat had submitted Spencer’s name about a month ago. Granted, an estimation of time like that could mean a lot of things, but...about a month ago, to Carly’s recollection, was when she and Cat weren’t talking. It was when they were still both struggling with jealousy about the other’s connection with Sam. It was possibly even creeping up to the point in time when the situation reached a boiling point and Sam and Cat had their fight.

Yet Cat had still cared enough about Carly and her family to offer Spencer’s name to her old school as a possibility for this opportunity.

Sometimes, lately, Carly remembers Cat telling her that she had a crush on her...or, really, that she thought it was *more* than a crush, something Carly can’t consider without blushing just at the thought. As they’ve been rebuilding their friendship, Carly has considered the possibility that feelings might creep back up for Cat, though so far, she doesn’t think she’s seen any evidence of it. But it’s something she thinks about. It’s something that, if she’s honest, has crossed her mind with some regularity since Cat first mentioned it.

About a month ago, though, if you’d asked Carly if she thought Cat might still have feelings for her, she would have said *definitely* not. There was no way, with their contentious connection through Sam, built on jealousy and separation, that she could imagine Cat entertaining any affection for her.

And yet...

Maybe Cat wasn't in love with her, then, but Carly has to marvel at the capacity of her heart for kindness and love, even to people who maybe don't deserve it.

At the movies, she and Cat end up sitting next to each other, mostly because they know there's no chance of sharing popcorn with Sam, so they share it with each other instead. As the previews start and the theater lights dim, Cat is holding the popcorn, balancing it on her leg with the bucket facing Carly so they can share.

But as Carly gets engrossed in a trailer, she reaches into the bucket and touches Cat's own warm hand.

Carly's hand jerks back like she's touched fire, an action she doesn't feel at all in control of, an instinct she can't even comprehend, because it's not like it should be *shocking* to brush against your friend's hand in a shared popcorn bucket.

She looks guiltily over at Cat, who smiles at her in an apologetic sort of way, and passes the bucket to Carly.

Carly half-heartedly eats some of the popcorn, feeling a churn of confusing and shameful emotions, before she starts to lose her appetite and passes the bucket back to Cat.

For the rest of the movie, they pass the bucket back and forth quietly in the darkened theater, and their hands don't touch once. When Cat asks her if she wants to share a snack during the second movie, Carly declines politely.

She doesn't have much of an appetite at that point.

-

The last two weeks of school seem to fly by, in a way that feels exhilarating instead of overwhelming. Cat feels prepared, confident, and eager for summer as she studies and turns in final projects and little extra credit boosts (just in case).

Her finals week technically ends on Wednesday, though Sam has something to turn in Thursday, and Tori and Carly both have a test Thursday as well; Jade, of course, finished her finals last week. Thursday also happens to be the last night of the full moon, so the plan is to visit Shadow Creek Park to celebrate the end of the semester together. And then Friday night, Beck is hosting a party for the entire group at his trailer.

The night in the park is standard, except for the part where Cat uses her dad's credit card to buy celebratory steaks for them all to eat before they travel up to the park together. It's the kind of purchase that probably won't be questioned if she keeps it moderate. Cat feels pretty confident making them, but they're at Tori's, and Tori's dad, perhaps understandably, is *not* confident in Cat and Tori's ability, so he oversees them as they grill outside. Trina is home, and shows up to sniff around, before Tori successfully snarls at her enough that she leaves them alone. Cat feels a little bad about it. She and Trina were never *close*, but they got along well enough in high school.

Then again, as soon as Trina went off to college, she really never spoke to Cat again. So maybe Cat doesn't owe her a steak.

The steaks turn out *amazing*, which prompts Trina to come downstairs and linger in the kitchen, ostensibly getting a bottle of water from the fridge, while this time Tori just ignores her completely.

At the park, the three wolves romp around so joyfully, it makes the celebration in the air feel *obvious*. There's a part of Cat that still keeps thinking about school, as if she can't quite believe the semester is over. Probably because she hasn't gotten her grades. But as she and Jade throw toys for the wolves, as Carly nearly bowls Cat over with delight, and as Sam and Tori make her laugh as they bounce excitedly into the air, Cat starts to finally relax.

For her part, Jade seems *intense*. Cat starts to learn why when they go back to Jade's house.

"It's summer break. Which means I can spend my free time making the kinds of films I *want* to make," she explains. "I have a lot of ideas." She squints at Cat. "How do you feel about body horror?"

"Um." Cat feels a little nauseous. "Not good?"

"Too bad," Jade drawls. "I have this idea for a woman who accidentally gives birth to her own tumor—"

"JADE!"

"What?"

Despite Jade ruining her appetite for the rest of the night, they have a good time hanging out, and when Cat sleeps, she sleeps hard, finally unburdened by the stress of school.

The next morning, they pick up the werewolves and go to a diner all together, and then, they all head home to take naps so they have energy for Beck's party that night. They've already decided that Jade is going to be designated driver, since she's had a whole week to be finished with school already, and Cat, Sam and Carly will be staying over at Tori's; Carly has already specifically stated she will be fine staying on the couches with Sam and Cat.

Tonight is also when they're planning to tell the guys about Sam and Carly's relationship. As Sam drives them to Tori's so they can park their car there, they discuss how to go about it.

"I think I should do it," Cat says, leaning forward from the back seat to talk to Sam and Carly.

"Why?" Sam frowns.

"Because if I say it, then they know I'm not all upset about it," she answers reasonably.

"It's not a *bad* idea," Carly says uncertainly to Sam.

“I guess it’s true that no matter who says it, people are gonna look at Cat to see how she feels,” Sam admits.

“Then even if I’m not the one to say it, I’ll be ready to tell them that you and I are still together and that Carly and I are still friends!” Cat says reasonably.

“I think I’d prefer that,” Carly states. “It’s really Sam and my news to tell. And she and I probably need to get better at telling it.”

Sam grunts, but she isn’t disagreeing.

In the car with Tori and Jade, Jade asks, “So, uh. Do the guys know what’s going on with you three? Or are Tori and I still sworn to secrecy?”

“We were just discussing that!” Cat announces.

“We’re going to tell them,” Carly says confidently.

“Oh,” Tori replies, sounding interested. “That’s great!”

“It’s necessary,” Sam says succinctly. She’s quieter than usual. Cat is sitting in the middle of the backseat, as usual, and she squeezes Sam’s hand. Sam looks at her and gives her a slight smile.

At Beck’s, they are the last to arrive, and Beck, Robbie and Andre erupt into cheers upon their arrival. They’re ushered inside Beck’s trailer, where there are drinks on ice and a fully-packed bowl on the table next to a tray with even more fragrant, freshly-ground weed.

“Welcome, guys!” Beck says with a broad grin. “Happy end of the semester!”

“It’s been so long!” Cat cries, flinging herself at him in a hug.

He laughs and returns the hug, and Robbie grabs onto Cat from the other side. “We’ve missed you!” he practically shouts in her ear.

“I missed you, too!” She turns to hug him before just wordlessly wrapping Andre in a big hug.

Andre laughs. “Hey, Little Red,” he says casually.

“I think I’ve missed you most of all,” Cat tells him earnestly, face pressed against his shoulder.

“It *has* been a long time,” he says, almost wistful, before pulling back to look at Cat. “You look happy,” he assesses.

“I am!” she tells him.

The others have all finished greeting the guys by this point; Jade has already moved on to popping open a Wahoo Punch and sitting on the couch, attention on the group, wearing a

slight smile that suggests she expects Sam and Carly's news to be a spectacle.

Which...Cat turns to look at Sam and Carly. They're standing next to each other, looking *awkward*. Cat can tell they're both trying to gear themselves up to figure out how to bring up their relationship.

Maybe Beck thinks they're uncomfortable at the party for some reason, because he says, "Um, so there are drinks over there, and Andre packed a bowl, we thought we might go outside and smoke once you got here," he offers.

"Yeah, in a minute," Sam agrees. But then she and Carly both still *stand* there.

"So...what's new?" Andre asks in a tone that indicates he's simply trying to break the tension that has obviously settled in the trailer. Across the room, Jade hides a smile by taking a big sip of her Wahoo Punch. Tori drifts a little closer to Jade, eyes on Sam and Carly.

"Well," Carly says uncertainly, "Sam and I have some news...don't we, Sam?" It's as if she ran out of courage halfway through her statement and lobbed the task to Sam.

"Um, yeah! Right. So, uh. Carly and I. We're...how would you say it, Carls?" she asks, passing right back to her new girlfriend with narrowed eyes.

"We're...oh, fuck it," Carly mutters, and grabs Sam and kisses her, right in front of everyone.

Jade doubles over with laughter. Tori starts clapping. Andre appears frozen. Robbie gasps dramatically. Beck doesn't seem to react at all.

Cat is grinning ear to ear, because she's actually truly *happy* to see them together like this, something she's wanted for a long time. And she makes sure to keep the grin on her face because, as expected, the three guys turn to look at her, one by one. "And I'm thrilled for them!" she informs them. She adds quickly, "Oh, and Sam and I are still together and Carly and I are still friends!"

"Wow!" Robbie utters. "But you—but she—*wow!*"

"Congratulations," Beck finally says mildly, looking from Cat to Sam and Carly, who have stopped kissing and instead stand hand in hand, but slightly flushed and looking giddy and a little chagrined.

"That's...really cool," Andre says slowly. He's nodding to himself, like he's putting pieces together, and he sounds kind of awed. And quickly, he reverts to his placid baseline (as opposed to his anxious one), and states, "I'm really glad you guys found something that makes you all happy."

"We really did!" Cat tells them cheerfully.

Within moments, Robbie has Cat cornered. "Oh, my god. Tell me *everything*," he says eagerly, handing her a hard lemonade.



“I will!” Cat promises, “After the smoking circle.” She points to where Andre is leading everyone outside of the trailer, holding the pipe aloft like a guiding beacon.

“I’ve gotta say,” Andre says after taking the first hit and passing the pipe. “This actually kinda makes sense.”

“What does?” Tori asks before accepting the bowl from Beck, who reaches past Jade to give it to her.

“This Sam and Carly thing.” Andre gestures between them. “I kinda feel like...I don’t know. The vibes were off with you two before. Now they’re right.”

Beck squints at him. “How high are you, already?”

Andre laughs. “It hasn’t even hit yet. I’m just being honest. Can’t you see they’re happier?”

“Of course they are, they’re having sex,” Jade snarks. But then her eyes land on Cat apologetically.

Cat isn’t bothered, but she does want to make one thing clear. “Well, Sam was already having sex,” she reminds them all.

“Yeah, now double it,” Sam says under her breath, smirking.

Andre either doesn’t hear her or chooses not to react, and says, “Well, to be fair, I saw Carly a lot more than I saw you two. And, yeah, now that I think about it, something shifted for her a couple months ago, maybe.”

Carly smiles. “Maybe so,” she says, noncommittally.

Andre probably reads her tone, because he just says, “Well, anyway, good for you guys. Jade, how’d your semester go?”

“Fine,” Jade replies evenly, before adding. “Except for the fact that my program is full of colossal idiots.”

“Sounds about right,” Beck muses, looking smug.

Jade glares at him. “Don’t worry, as soon as my classmates graduate, one of them will be foolish enough to cast you,” she tells him sweetly.

“By then, maybe I’ll be the one who gets to be choosy,” Beck says loftily. “You guys know that pilot I shot earlier this year?”

Robbie and Andre both say yes, but they’re drowned out by all the women and their very straightforward chorus of nos.

“Well, I shot a pilot,” Beck says, slightly irritated. “And it got picked up! We start filming next month.”

“Beck! That’s amazing!” Tori gushes. “Congratulations!”

The rest of the circle offers their own congratulations and excitement, even Jade who eventually rolls her eyes and says dryly, “Congrats.”

“I thought you’d be a little happier for me,” he tells her.

“I *am* happy for you,” she responds in the same flat tone. Her lips twitch up in the slightest smile. Beck smiles back.

“I’m not a series regular, but I’m supposed to appear in at least four or five more episodes,” Beck admits. “And there’s always a chance to move up.”

“It’s amazing to even be in a pilot that got picked up!” Tori says enthusiastically.

“I’m so proud of him,” Robbie comments, looking like he’s about to cry.

They continue talking about school, and about Beck’s opportunity, as they pass around the bowl, then pass it again after Andre repacks it. But when they head inside, Robbie sidles up next to Cat and slips his arm through hers.

“Okay,” he says conspiratorially. “*Now* talk to me!” His expression shifts to concern. “Are you really happy?” he asks.

“Yes!” Cat tells him. “I really am.” Beck is on the other side of Robbie, looking like maybe he’d rather not be in this conversation, but clearly listening, all the same.

“So what *happened*?”

Cat recognizes that parts of this don’t feel like her story to tell, especially remembering the way Carly and Sam have both expressed that they need to get better about talking about this, since they kept their previous relationship a secret for so long. So she tries to keep the details about them brief. “Well, at a certain point, it got silly trying to pretend that Sam and Carly weren’t in love with each other, too, and I told Sam that I thought sharing her love with Carly would be a good thing, so… Sam ended up with two girlfriends.”

“*Wow*,” Robbie says in awe.

“So they *are* girlfriends?” Beck asks, eyes narrowed a little.

“Yes?” Cat answers. She’d thought that much was obvious.

“I just wondered. I thought maybe they could be friends with benefits or something,” Beck replies.

“You don’t *see* how in love they are?” Robbie asks, slightly incredulous. “You didn’t *hear* Cat say just now that they’re in love?”

“Sure,” Beck answers evenly, “I just wasn’t sure if that was an exaggeration.”

Cat can sense, from his reaction, that Beck is a little uncomfortable. So she seeks to reassure him as she tells Robbie, “Okay, it hasn’t always been easy. For a while there, Carly and I weren’t really talking, we were kind of jealous of each other’s time with Sam. But as we got used to it, it started to work better. I think we both started to see the ways the other made Sam so happy and realized we didn’t need to compete, we could work together.” It’s the best way to explain everything without having to go into the fight, and the breakup that she and Sam have agreed never actually happened, though a part of Cat can’t forget the awful feeling of thinking that Sam wasn’t coming back.

“That’s so *wild*!” Robbie says. “I’m so happy for you, all of you. I know this is a thing people do, I just never knew it could *work*.”

“Sometimes it can, for a little while,” Beck says.

Cat frowns. It’s not like Beck to be so pessimistic. So she just tells Robbie, “I think we’re starting to figure out how to make it work for a long time.”

Sam sidles up to her at about that moment, and slips an arm around Cat’s waist, pressing a kiss to her jaw. Cat turns and invites Sam to kiss her lips, which they keep short, but Robbie croons affectionately and Beck politely averts his gaze. “How you doin’, babe?” she asks Cat.

“I could use a water,” Cat admits. “Dry mouth.” She’d rather switch to water for a bit than drink her hard lemonade too quickly. She knows she’s a lightweight.

“I’ll get you one,” Sam smiles, squeezing her and wandering away. Cat watches her go. She can see Carly across the trailer talking with Tori, Jade, and Andre, sees the way Carly’s gaze finds Sam, then finds hers. Cat smiles at her, and Carly smiles back before quickly turning back to her conversation.

“I think I’m most surprised about you and Carly,” Robbie breaks into her thoughts.

“Huh?” Cat asks. “Oh, we’re not—um.” She blushes.

“No, I know! I just meant your friendship!”

“Oh! Oh, right!” Cat answers. She can see the way Beck’s head tilts, very slightly, as he watches her. “Yeah, we’re really good friends!” Cat says quickly.

“Here you go.” Sam brings her a bottle of water.

“Thank you.” Cat sets down her lemonade and opens her water, drinking deeply.

“So what’s this show of yours about?” Sam asks Beck.

While Beck describes the plot of a show about a group of restaurant workers with various magical abilities, Cat looks over her shoulder at Carly again. As if she can feel Cat’s eyes on her, Carly looks over at her once again. She looks at Cat and Sam together and smiles.

Robbie’s timing when he’d mentioned being surprised about her and Carly had just been kind of a weird coincidence, because Cat had just been considering the fact that, as much as she’d

thought she'd put it behind her...these recent few weeks of spending more time with Carly has made it clear to her, once again, that she absolutely still has a crush on Carly.

When she'd watched Carly kiss Sam, she'd been *happy* for them, but she also knows she'd been a little...*jealous*. But not of Carly this time.

She's a little high, from the one good hit she had outside. And maybe that's part of why she can't stop thinking about what Carly's lips might feel like against hers. Maybe that's why she'd imagined, even without any actual evidence, that she could taste Carly on Sam's lips.

If she closes her eyes, she can even sort of *feel* Carly's lips press against her own...

"You good?" Sam asks her, nudging her slightly.

Cat laughs, cheeks warm. "I'm great," she says. "Just...realizing it's *summer*!"

"It is," Sam chuckles. "And it's gonna be a good one."

## Serenity > Summer

It feels good to relax with friends at Beck's party. It's an entirely different kind of celebration from the one she had in Shadow Creek Park the night before. Ushering in the summer and the reprieve from school as wild creatures had felt immensely freeing, appropriately enough. But being a werewolf can also feel isolating at times. Carly *loves* the dynamic between herself, Tori, and Sam, she treasures the bond of trust they all share with Jade and Cat, but sometimes, just three wolves being left to their own devices by their pair of human companions feels like a very small circle. Especially compared to a night like tonight, where even the presence of three more people is enough to feel like a satisfying crowd.

Maybe it's just because Carly spent a year in Italy struggling to find community, and spent months in Los Angeles so close to Sam and yet completely separated from her, that it feels so important to her now to have a broader circle of friends. Maybe it's also just exciting to be among so many other queer people, where she can be open about not only her bisexuality but her polyamorous girlfriend. There are different and overlapping circles of trust within this group, but Carly is learning how to live more openly, with more integrity, and it's an *exciting* feeling.

There's music playing, but it hasn't turned into a bunch of karaoke performances, at least not yet. Maybe because they're all so happy to be together, catching up, filling each other in on what's been going on for the past couple of months. Carly is listening to Andre and Tori talk about how they want to spend some time over the summer collaborating on songs together. There are a lot of conversations about summer plans, including Jade's plans to shoot a film, Beck's acting in his TV show, Robbie trying to get as many stand-up gigs in as possible before going off to college in the fall. Most of them seem lucky enough to have the free time to focus on artistic pursuits, although Andre does have part-time work as a production assistant at the Hollywood Bowl, Tori is working as a tutor over the summer for kids whose parents want them to get a jump on what they'll be learning next year, and Robbie has evidently been working as a prep cook at a sushi restaurant all year, something Carly never knew. She supposes if she were around him more often this past semester, she'd probably have noticed the smell of fish. And Sam and Cat, of course, will be taking on more babysitting jobs over the summer when parents won't be able to send their kids to school. But everyone's summer jobs are part-time, and most conversations revolve around the fun they're going to have all together and what they can accomplish.

It's cool that everyone is dreaming big. Carly had texted in a group thread with Freddie and Sam a little bit, and Freddie is planning to try to be in Los Angeles a lot over the summer, so they can film more episodes of *iCarly*. They can all make a little money from the site, so it counts as work, sort of. But otherwise, Carly doesn't know what else she wants to do this summer. She feels like she's still learning what she wants to focus on, arts-wise, as she takes classes. She doesn't quite have the educational background of these kids, who got to explore a lot of the things Carly is discovering now when they were in high school.

But Tori and Andre's conversation comes to an end when Jade calls Tori over to apparently describe some incident with bags of blood to Sam. It sounds horrifying, and Carly merely

takes a moment to look at Sam, at the way she's grinning, before she turns back to Andre.

"You two are cute," Andre assesses.

"Me and Sam?" Carly asks.

"Who else?" Andre replies.

Carly smiles. It's been a common topic of conversation, not surprisingly, but it's still a bit strange to talk about. "Thank you. I'm really happy."

"I can tell." Andre tilts his head to the side. "You know, I was thinking. Back on Valentine's Day..." Carly feels a sinking in her stomach, remembering the way she'd cried all over Andre in the car after they'd had a really nice evening together, on a friend date. "It was Sam, wasn't it?"

"What was Sam?"

"The person you were talking about. The person you wanted but couldn't have." Carly doesn't know what to say, so she just nods. Ironically, though their current relationship is out in the open, their previous one still isn't known to the guys of this friend group. "It was just sinking in for me how deep this must've gone for you."

"It's...yeah," Carly says. "With Sam and I, it's been a...complicated thing for a long time."

Andre nods seriously and seems to take that in. "Well. I'm really glad you worked it out. And honestly? I'm glad it didn't ruin things with you and Cat. Because I really like you both and I wouldn't have wanted to pick sides."

"We wouldn't have made you," Carly laughs. "But thank you."

"Carly!" Cat calls. "Come look at this!"

"Speak of the devil," Carly gives Andre an apologetic smile.

"You should ask her about the time she played the devil in Jade's gay play," Andre suggests with a laugh.

Carly considers this, but when she approaches Cat, she's already showing Carly something on her screen. "Look at this!" Cat exclaims.

It's a street sign to indicate an animal crossing, except it's definitely Bigfoot. "Oh my god!" Carly laughs.

"I heard you're obsessed with Bigfoot!" Cat exclaims.

"Oh, god, here we go again," Sam mutters from across the room.

"You were there when Bigfoot stole the RV!" Carly shouts.

“Uhh, what?” Beck asks, looking worried.

“I was there,” Sam says evenly, “I just don’t need to go looking for him again.”

“Because you’re satisfied with the evidence, aren’t you?” Carly raises her eyebrows. Sam doesn’t respond, which tells Carly it’s a yes. She turns back to Cat. “This is so funny.”

“There’s more!” Cat replies eagerly. “This whole site has a bunch of Bigfoot stuff. Here, look!” She hands her phone to Carly.

Carly scrolls through and looks at some of the items. There’s everything from posters and calendars to bracelets and t-shirts to stuffed animals and statuettes. Carly grins. “I’m so happy you thought of me.”

“I thought maybe you might get some ideas for decorating your apartment!”

“The Bigfoot crossing sign, for sure,” Carly says thoughtfully. “Maybe I’ll get the doormat, too.”

“I’ll send you the link!” Cat offers.

When her phone buzzes a moment later, Carly assumes for just a moment that it’s Cat texting her the link to the Bigfoot store. But then it persists. Carly pulls out her phone and realizes, “Oh, shit, my dad’s calling!”

The conversations in the room start to fade as apparently people hear her, and Sam asks, “Do you want to answer while you’re drunk?”

“Yes, of course, I can sound sober.” She waves off her friends in the room. “I’ll step outside, you guys keep having fun!” She can feel Sam’s eyes linger on her as she heads outside, and she answers as soon as she’s off the steps to Beck’s trailer. “Hello?” She *sounds* fine, she knows it, but she’s careful to moderate her voice anyway, knowing how keen her father’s hearing is.

“Hey, sweetheart,” her father says in his warm voice. “I thought I was about to get your voicemail. It’s not too late there, is it?”

“Not at all,” Carly laughs. “I’m just hanging out with friends.” She quickly estimates the mental math, and adds, “It must be early there, though.”

“Earlier than you’d like to be up,” her father answers. “Well, I won’t keep you from your friends for long. I just wanted to call and congratulate you on finishing your first year of college!”

“Thank you!” Carly answers.

“I’m so proud of you and support whatever you choose to do with your life,” Colonel Shay says affectionately.

“Thanks, Dad,” Carly replies quietly, wondering if he would say this if he knew she was currently drinking with a bunch of queer people, including her girlfriend who already has a girlfriend.

“Is everything else going okay?” he asks.

“Everything’s great, actually.” But she doesn’t even know what else to say. How can she even sum up what’s going on in her life right now? She wishes her head didn’t feel so muddled, so cloudy.

“I’ll let you get back to your friends,” he decides. “I just wanted to tell you how proud I am.”

“I’m glad you called,” Carly tells him. “I miss you.”

“I miss you, too, sweetheart. As soon as I can travel to see you, I’ll let you know.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye, Dad.”

The call disconnects. Carly swallows, feeling the ache in the pit of her stomach that sometimes feels like it never goes away, the perpetual ache of missing her father, or longing for his affection, his love, and feeling somehow like she has both and yet her dad remains a complete stranger to her.

She starts crying, and abruptly feels heaving sobs wrack her body as she walks further away from the trailer, trying to make sure she won’t be overheard as she gives herself a private moment, grieving for something she’s not sure she ever had: an actual relationship with her father. Even her youthful memories of him feel false sometimes. And yet, she *has* a dad, something she knows some of her friends *don’t* have, and it feels selfish to mourn not having a deeper connection with him when she knows him, knows he loves her, and knows how much she loves and admires him.

The crash of hanging up the phone with him hits her hard, like a nosedive from the exhilaration of welcoming the summer, the heartfelt delight of hearing that her dad is *proud* of her, to this aching sadness for a lack of something she both absolutely has and often feels like she *doesn’t* have. It’s confusing, it’s painful, and most of all, Carly hates that she’s let this disrupt what has been a perfectly lovely night.

She’s just starting to try to pull herself together when she hears the amplification of sound from inside as the door to the trailer opens, she sees the light spilling out onto the yard. She’s almost positive she’s going to smell Sam when scent finally registers through her stuffed-up human nose, but as she glances over her shoulder, she’s surprised to see Cat.

“Um. Hi,” Carly says, still facing away from her. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I could see you out the window on the phone but then you were gone so I thought maybe you went to the bathroom or something but then it had been a while so I thought I’d



better check on you..." Cat trails off. Carly can hear her moving closer. "Are you okay?"

Carly just sighs in response. "Where's Sam?"

"She's inside. Having a *very* heated argument with Jade about what is the 'best weapon'." Carly can't see whether Cat is making air quotes, but from her tone, she probably is. Carly smiles and shakes her head. "I can go get her if you want," Cat offers.

"No," Carly says quietly. "I don't want any more attention on this."

"Oh," Cat says, her tone matching Carly's. After a moment, she asks, "Do you want me to leave you alone?"

"No," Carly decides. She folds her arm, still looking away from Cat.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Cat asks after a moment.

"It's stupid," Carly scoffs.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't talk about it." When Carly doesn't answer, Cat guesses. "Is your dad okay?"

"He's fine. He's great. He's just like he always is." Her voice is bitter. Hurt.

Cat obviously notices. "But you're not."

Carly shakes her head and finally turns to look at Cat. "I just miss him," she murmurs. "And it feels so unfair. He's such a *great* dad who is just...*never* there."

Cat nods quietly. Then she says, "I haven't seen my dad in almost two years."

Carly blinks. "You haven't?"

Cat shakes her head. "He's with my brother, in Idaho. My brother needs a lot of support." She looks away. "I miss my dad, too, sometimes. But at the same time...I don't think he's ever understood me."

Cat isn't even crying, but just *hearing* that fills Carly with the unmistakable sense of kindred pain, and she reaches for Cat to hug her.

"I'm okay," Cat tells her, her own arms wrapped around Carly.

Maybe that's true. But, "I'm not," Carly answers.

"You will be," Cat tells her confidently. Carly scoffs with her breath, but somehow it, too, is what she needs to hear, and she's crying again, but it feels like release this time, not despair.

When she pulls away long moments later, she's shaking her head. "How do you always know what to say?"

Cat shrugs. "Most of the time, I feel like I never do."

Carly is still shaking her head, looking down at her. “You’re so...” she trails off.

“...What?” Cat asks, blinking, befuddled and beautiful.

For a wild moment, all Carly wants is to kiss her. The air feels charged, electric, she feels the *pull* of Cat, and in that moment, it’s as if she’s seeing Cat through Sam’s eyes, and sees all her goodness, all her beauty and her heart and her sweetness reflected in the symmetry of her face, in the depth of her eyes, in the curve of her mouth.

But the door to the trailer is opening. Carly springs back, muscles clenching like she’s expecting a fight. “Carls? Cat?” Sam asks, zeroing in on them immediately.

“Yeah. Hey,” Carly answers, voice wavering slightly.

Sam starts toward them. “What’s wrong?”

Carly shakes her head. “Just. My dad.”

Sam is next to them both, looking between them. Cat finally says, “I’ll leave you two alone.”

“Thanks for checking on her,” Sam tells Cat. She turns back to Carly. “I’m sorry I didn’t notice how long you’d been out here.”

“That’s okay.” Carly cracks a smile. “I heard you were having a *very* important argument.”

Sam cocks her head. “Jade has some good points, but she’s wrong,” she says flatly. Then her expression turns more serious. “What did your dad say?”

Carly feels her mouth wobble a little. “That he’s proud of me,” she whispers.

Somehow, Sam understands exactly, and she pulls Carly to her. Carly doesn’t have many tears left in her, not about her dad, so instead she cries about *Cat*, and about every confusing drunk feeling she doesn’t know what to do with.

But then, she ends up kissing Sam, feeling desperately like she has something she owes her, something she needs to prove. Sam pulls away after only a few moments. “Guess you’re feeling better,” she snarks, but there’s a question in her tone.

Carly wipes at her face. “How awful do I look?”

Sam scrutinizes her. “Like you’ve been crying?” she offers.

“Obviously,” sighs Carly. “Give me just a minute to freshen up and I’ll be back in.”

“I’ll wait right here for you,” Sam promises.

And she does. And Carly is endlessly grateful for the love and support of the person who knows her best.

She pushes aside everything else as they head back into the party together.

For the rest of the night, Carly tends to stick by Sam as much as possible. At first, she drinks more, but almost immediately she decides what she really needs to do is drink less. She feels like her thoughts finally start to clear as she rides to Tori's house in the back of Jade's car, staring out the window at the bright city lights in the dark.

She thinks about how she's supposed to share the couches with Sam and Cat, and wonders if she really can do it. She's still so ashamed of how she almost just *kissed* Cat, in a moment of (drunk) vulnerability. She wonders if Cat realizes what almost happened, and then considers whether there's *any* chance at all that Cat *doesn't* realize it. It seems so *obvious* in retrospect.

"You okay, Carly?" Tori asks her in a quiet voice from the front seat.

"Yeah," Carly answers. Her voice is raspy; she's tired, she smoked weed, and she cried tonight. "Just tired," she explains.

She is otherwise left with her thoughts while Jade drives and, beside Carly, Cat rests her head against Sam's shoulder, eyes closed, expression content.

At Tori's house, Carly considers trying to find an excuse to sleep in Trina's room, but Tori groans when they pull into the driveway. "Trina's home," she reports.

Well. There goes that idea.

Inside, Jade and Tori (but mostly Jade) help make sure the three of them have enough pillows and blankets to use on the couch, and Sam suggests that Carly use the downstairs bathroom to get ready for bed first. Carly changes into pajamas and half-heartedly brushes her teeth, then comes back out and collapses onto the far couch, the one that Sam and Cat don't sleep on.

Despite her exhaustion, she doesn't fall asleep right away. She stares at the ceiling while Sam uses the bathroom and Cat situates the pillows and blankets on her couch. Cat doesn't try to talk to her, but Carly can hear her humming quietly to herself, as if absolutely nothing is wrong.

Maybe nothing is, Carly thinks. It's just past the full moon, she was upset, she was drunk. Maybe it isn't surprising that she might have the urge to kiss a pretty girl who once had feelings for her. Maybe it isn't a big deal. Carly fell in love with her best friend, and she and Cat have been getting closer. Maybe it's normal for her to mix up friendship and romance and other kinds of intimacy sometimes.

Carly decides to see how she feels tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that. If any of these confusing feelings about Cat linger, she can deal with them then. But for now? She's just going to let it go. There's no need to tell Sam about a kiss that wasn't. There's no need to talk with Cat about something that didn't actually happen.

Cat goes into the bathroom, and Sam goes over to kneel on the floor next to where Carly is lying down. "Hey," she says softly.

"What?" Carly asks, turning to look at her.

“You end up having fun tonight?” Sam asks.

Carly smiles slightly. “Yeah. I did.”

“We finally did it, huh?” Sam says.

“We did ‘it’ a long time ago, Sam.”

“No,” Sam chuckles. “We finally told people about us.”

That does make Carly smile, more broadly this time. “We really did.” Though her expression clears after a moment. “Though, we should really get better at telling people, like, *verbally*, instead of showing them.”

“Eh, baby steps,” Sam says. She leans her head against her hand. “Still, it felt kinda good to be like...with you. In front of other people. Who aren’t just Tori and Jade. I mean, those two are awesome, but let’s be real, they’re freaks, they don’t have room to judge us.”

“That wouldn’t stop them,” Carly snarks.

Sam grins. “I love you.”

“I love you.” Carly sits up enough to kiss Sam.

She’s glad they got their goodnight kiss in when they did, because Cat comes out of the bathroom moments later. “Are you two ready for bed?” she asks.

“I think so,” Sam says. She stands up, and nudges Carly. “Which way do you want to lie down?”

“What?” Carly asks, confused.

“Cat and I talked about it, we think I should sleep next to you tonight. You want to be against the couch or on the edge?”

The way it’s tossed out there, this *thing* Carly has wanted so badly for so long, so simple, makes her heart ache with sweetness. “You—uh. The edge?”

“Then turn on your side so I can get in there.” While Carly turns and resettles herself, Sam goes over to the other couch, where Cat is lying down already, and kisses her goodnight. “Thank you,” she tells her.

“Go be with her. She needs you,” Cat says. She’s speaking quietly, like she’s trying not to let Carly overhear, but Carly hears every word.

She *does* need Sam. But she can’t help but feel Sam’s presence like a *gift* from Cat, and she’s torn between the sting of feeling pitied and the relief of feeling gratitude.

But honestly, she doesn’t dwell much on any of it, not even the fact that Cat is mere feet away in the dim Vega living room the first time she and Sam really get to sleep next to one

another in years, as Sam slides between Carly and the couch, covers herself with the blanket, and wraps her arm around Carly's waist, holding her close. Not that there's much of a choice when sharing these couches.

"You'll wake me up if I start snoring?" Carly whispers.

"You know I will," Sam answers. "Because it'll be so loud and annoying."

"You're annoying."

"You love me."

"I really do."

Carly falls asleep quickly, feeling warm and safe in the arms of her lover.

-

Freddie is scheduled to visit at the beginning of the following week. Sam is already annoyed about it.

"No matter which apartment he stays in, he's going to get in the way of my sex life," she grumbles.

"I mean," Carly says slowly. "He does *know*." Sam groans even more as she recalls that he was the first person Carly told. "We could just tell him to...go away."

"Yeah, right. And then invite him back into your apartment that smells like sex?" Sam sighs and rubs her face. "This is a bad idea."

"It'll be *fine*," Carly says encouragingly. "Besides, he's probably only staying for a week or so before he goes back to Seattle for a while."

"Well," Sam says grumpily, "I guess I'd better get my licks in while I can."

"Oh my god, that was awful."

"You won't be saying that in a few minutes," Sam vows, already undressing and guiding Carly toward her bed.

She can't read Carly's mind, but she can read her body, and feels certain she's been proven right very quickly.

Freddie drives down from his school on Sunday. The plan is that he's going to stay at Carly's apartment first, so Sam and Cat go over to Carly's to meet him. They arrive a little earlier than Freddie does, in part because it's officially summer, they don't have any babysitting to do today, so fun is on the agenda, and hanging out with Carly for a while is something they both seem to be into.

It's a little weird to be in Carly's apartment with Cat. It's only happened once before, and until then she hadn't even known Cat had been in there just with Carly. After Carly walks them up and inside her apartment, Cat looks around at Carly's blank walls and comments, "I know it would be way too early for it to arrive yet, but I almost expected to see the Bigfoot sign when I came in!"

Carly laughs. "You know, I almost forgot about that! I have to remember to order that."

Carly already has a pillow and blanket folded at one end of her couch, which just makes the small piece of furniture seem even smaller. Sam sits next to the bedding, and Cat sits next to her on the couch.

Maybe Carly feels the awkwardness, because she starts asking, "Does anyone need anything to eat? Drink?"

"No, thank you," Cat answers politely.

"I could eat," Sam replies.

"What else is new," Carly mumbles, and comes over after a moment with a root beer and a bag of chips. But then she doesn't seem to know what to do with herself and hovers nearby next to the couch, then sits on the chair at her little table but almost immediately stands back up, then walks back toward her bed, but then ends up standing near the couch again.

"Are you nervous about Freddie visiting?" Cat asks her, twisting on the couch to watch her as she flits around the apartment anxiously.

"What? No," Carly answers. "Why would you think that?"

"Because you're acting nervous?" Cat answers, frowning a little.

Carly laughs, but it's forced. "No, no. I'm fine." And with an exaggerated performance of calm, she sits at her table again, where at least she can see Sam and Cat, and they can see her.

"Let's watch something," Sam suggests, trying to find something neutral for them to do so that Carly can stop freaking out. Probably she's realizing that Cat is here with them in the room where she and Sam usually have sex and she's overthinking it. Overthinking is one of those things Carly is really good at. If Cat weren't here, Sam could probably come up with *several* ways to help Carly *stop* thinking, but then, if Cat weren't here, she and Carly would probably be doing that anyway.

For a brief moment, Sam entertains the fantasy of helping Carly not think *in front of* Cat, remembering the way Cat had smiled while watching them kiss in Beck's trailer, but... ultimately, she can't really see either of her girlfriends going for any kind of threesome, and being able to anticipate and imagine their objections in detail kinda ruins the fantasy. Which is a shame, because Sam would be lying if she said she hadn't been increasingly thinking about scenarios that could involve all three of them.

She remembers what Cat had said, about how some of the fun of being queer should be being able to talk about being attracted to the same people. Actually, out of the two of them, she could see Cat being a little more game to explore, because she knows what Cat thinks of Carly...except that Cat is also, generally, the more sexually reserved of the two of them. It's a strange paradox, the combination of Cat's openness to, well, *openness*, her acceptance of enjoying and participating in multiple sexual and romantic relationships, and her...sexual hang-ups. That's the best way Sam can think to describe them. While Sam has no complaints about her sex life with Cat, she knows that Cat still struggles with the fact that penetration, or at least the kind of penetration with sex toys that Cat would like to experiment with, still isn't something that comes easily to her. They still play with the unicorn horn toy, gently, but sometimes the results still yield tears of frustration. At least until Sam finds a way to stop Cat from thinking about things that upset her, too.

Sam reflects that maybe her greatest strength might be getting the women she cares about to calm down and enjoy themselves for a few minutes.

But she considers Carly. Carly, who, at least once she accepted her bisexuality, has always been eager and open to exploration with Sam, but who admitted that, if the situation had been reversed and Sam had fallen in love with Cat while still dating Carly, would not have been okay with the situation. Even now, Sam feels certain that getting Carly onboard for any kind of threesome-type activity would be hard sell. But maybe it's a good thing that Carly is someone who knows what she likes and won't try something she knows she won't enjoy. Sam would be proud of her if she stood up to a boyfriend who hounded her about a threesome she didn't want to have. Not that Sam would ever *hound* her...or even ask her, knowing what the answer will be.

Maybe Sam is here to be the one who grounds both her girlfriends, in different ways, and they're the ones who help push her out of her comfort zone. That sounds like what Sam needs, a lot of the time. A push.

Already, she thinks becoming the kind of Sam who can balance two romantic relationships is already an improvement on the kind of person she thought she'd be when she left Seattle, expecting to become a misanthropic hermit somewhere. Cat had saved her from that fate, and Cat and Carly had both taught her how to be the kind of person someone else relies on, the kind of person so capable of love that sometimes it feels so Sam like it pours out of her, like a glow, or like honey, seeping out of her to pour all over the floor.

Gross.

They show each other funny Splashface videos for a while until Carly gets the text that Freddie has parked in front of her apartment. "I'll go down and let him in," she says.

"I'll come with you!" Cat says excitedly. When Sam stays seated, the two of them turn to look at her from the door to the apartment. "Sam?" Cat prompts.

"What?"

Cat walks over and grabs Sam's hand, attempting to pull her off the couch. Sam resists, not so much that she pulls Cat on top of her, though she could if she wanted to. But then, Carly

comes over to grab Sam's other hand, commanding, "Come say hi to our friend," and together, they pull a groaning Sam to her feet.

Downstairs, Carly opens the door to let Freddie into the vestibule of the apartment complex and then he almost immediately grabs her in a strong hug. "It's so good to see you!" he tells her.

"Oh my god, you too!" Carly answers, squeezing back tightly.

"Hi, Freddie!" Cat cries, flinging herself at him in one of her own enthusiastic hugs almost as soon as he steps away from Carly. "We're glad you're back!"

"I'm glad to *be* back!" he answers.

When Cat steps back, Freddie turns to Sam. "Sam," he says, almost formally.

"Fredward."

They regard each other warily, uncertainly. Out of the corner of her eye, Sam can see Cat frown at her, which makes her stubbornly refuse to move toward Freddie. But then she sees the way Carly raises her eyebrows expectantly at Sam.

"Ah, fuck it," Sam mutters, then reaches over and grabs Freddie in a brief hug that involves a lot of vigorous back-patting.

"You can bro-hug with the best of them," Freddie tells her admiringly when they pull apart.

"I hope that means I left bruises," Sam grins.

"Let's get you settled," Carly says, "And then, if you're up for it, Beck is having a party. Well, I'm pretty sure he's having one whether you're up for it or not, so..."

"Oh, I'm up for it," Freddie assures them as they carry his bags up to Carly's apartment. Sam wonders how awkward *this* is going to end up being, but it seems that Freddie is fixated on the same thing Cat initially was. "You still haven't decorated in here?" he asks, sounding a little surprised.

It makes Sam feel a little defensive. At least Cat was tactful. "Maybe she's busy doing better things in here," she replies. And immediately regrets it, because, wasn't she trying to *avoid* awkwardness?

Cat seems to get it and kind of half-coughs awkwardly. Freddie just frowns. "It's not a *bad* thing," he says. "It was actually giving me an idea, for when we film *iCarly*."

"You...really think we'll have time for that while you're here?" Carly asks.

"Well, I should hope so. I'm going to be here all summer," Freddie states plainly.

"*What?*" Carly deadpans, clearly shocked.



“Well, other than having to go visit my mom for a couple of weeks so she doesn’t try to come visit me here.”

“Oh, no,” Sam starts muttering, “No, no, no, no, no.” She grabs Freddie by his shirt collar and tugs him closer. “You are *not* going to ruin my sex life all summer!” she shouts.

Freddie looks horrified. “I don’t even want to *think* about your sex life!” he shouts back.

“I don’t want you thinking about it either!” Sam screams.

“Will you just *calm down*!?” Freddie tugs his shirt collar out of Sam’s hands and straightens his clothes, looking disgruntled. “I’m not staying *here* the whole time,” he explains, his voice still verging on angry. “I’m mostly going to stay with Spencer while he’s in town working on his sculpture.”

Sam looks over at Carly and feels relief sweep over her. “Oh, thank *god*.”

“Tell me how you *really* feel.” Freddie rolls his eyes.

“I know we would’ve figured something out if we had to, but...” Cat pats Freddie’s shoulder. “I’m really glad you’re not staying with us forever,” she says cheerfully.

Freddie’s mouth thins into a forced smile. “Thanks, Cat,” he says, patting her shoulder in return.

They let Freddie put down his bags and use the bathroom while Cat texts Beck to let him know they’re all coming to the party. Beck confirms that he has pizza on the way that they can chip in for.

Carly drives them all over to Beck’s for the party, and it feels a little like a repeat of two days ago, except Freddie is the focus, as everyone greets him and welcomes him back to Los Angeles. Freddie is excited and thrilled, and they all start out smoking some weed while they wait for their pizzas to be delivered.

“So, uh, Freddie!” Robbie says after he takes his first hit. “I have some exciting news!”

“Oh, yeah?” Freddie says. Sam thinks he sounds a little wary.

“Yeah! So...I got into Stanford!”

“Wait, you did?” Jade asks, sounding surprised, while Tori gasps aloud and Andre whips his head over toward Robbie in shock. “And you didn’t tell us?”

“I wanted to tell Freddie first!” Robbie explains.

“Oh!” Freddie looks surprised, and stands up a little straighter. “Oh, wow, congratulations!”

“Thank you! So I guess we’ll be seeing each other around in the fall, huh?” Robbie grins.

“Wait, you’re going?” Freddie asks.

“Well, *yeah*,” Robbie answers, slightly incredulous.

“Oh, I just thought—I mean, just getting *accepted* is an accomplishment.”

Sam glances over at Carly, who suppresses a smirk and rolls her eyes. Freddie can be such a show-off.

“I wouldn’t have applied if I weren’t planning to go,” Robbie says reasonably.

“That makes sense, it—I just didn’t expect it to be the career path you’d want to pursue...”

At this, Robbie’s expression does falter a bit. He looks over at Beck, whose mouth is thin, but who pats him on the back encouragingly. “Well,” Robbie begins. “I guess I wouldn’t say it’s *ideal*. But my dad didn’t want to pay for any more arts school for me, he wants me to get a degree in something else. Like a backup plan. So I’m going to be studying computer science. Like you!” He smiles, and it’s a little forced. “Which is *great*! I like computers! And I can always still work on my comedy on weekends and everything. I’ve heard there are a lot of great venues in the Bay Area.”

“There’s a lot of everything in the Bay Area,” Freddie answers. He seems a little uncertain, perhaps nervous. “Well, I guess we’ll definitely see each other at school, then.”

“I’m so excited!” Robbie claps.

“Yeah!” Freddie says with obviously forced cheer. “This’ll be...fun!”

“Pizza’s here,” Beck interrupts brusquely, nudging Robbie. “Come help me carry it.”

The night proceeds with food, alcohol, and weed, and after a while, Freddie ends up sitting with Sam and Carly to talk about his thoughts about *iCarly*.

“What I was trying to say before we left Carly’s apartment,” he begins, glancing at Sam apprehensively as a splotch of color appears on his cheeks, “is that I was thinking, since Carly’s apartment is still pretty much a blank slate, maybe we can work with it to turn it into a good set location!”

Carly glances at Sam and frowns. “I’m really not sure there’s enough space for that.”

“I’m not saying we have to rearrange everything,” Freddie elaborates. “I just mean, like, even if we made space in front of the one blank wall you have near your front door. We wouldn’t have to move much, and we could decorate that wall to fit with the show more. Because, as great as this trailer was for our last episode,” Freddie gestures around him, “I’m not sure how much Beck will be able to help us this summer if he’s working on TV.”

“I guess,” Carly says uncertainly. “We could also use Sam and Cat’s apartment? That’s a place that already has a lot of personality.”

“That’s true,” Freddie says thoughtfully. “But also, maybe we can move away from doing everything live, and utilize multiple locations for different sketches?”

Now Sam is starting to get bored. “Freddie. Seriously,” she gripes. “Can we just have fun for *one night* without having to *work*?”

“This is fun!” Freddie insists.

“Go find Cat,” Carly nudges her. “I’ll keep talking to Freddie and fill you in later.”

“Yeah you will,” Sam drawls, mildly suggestive, then wanders away. Sure, she *wants* to work on *iCarly* over the summer, but she doesn’t want it to be her *whole* summer. The problem with Freddie always has been how single-minded he can get about things. Which, Sam reflects, she’s also pretty single-minded. Just about better things. Like food. Or sex.

And maybe there isn’t sex at this party, but there’s certainly food, and, at least, people she has sex with. She comes up behind Cat and subtly gropes her ass in greeting.

“Oh!” Cat squeaks, turning Sam’s subtlety into a pronouncement. Andre raises his eyebrows and Jade smirks as Cat blushes and elbows Sam. “What are you doing?” Cat asks her.

Sam wraps her arms around Cat from behind and nuzzles at her neck and shoulder briefly, making her giggle, before addressing the others. “Freddie was being boring so I was hoping you were discussing something more interesting.”

“Um, well,” Andre says briskly, “Jade was talking about this idea she has for a movie about this house but when you look out the window, it only shows you lies.” He looks uncomfortable, and steps away. “Sounds right up your alley, Sam, I’m gonna go ask Beck if I should pack another bowl.” He scurries away.

“Well, you scared Andre off,” Cat comments, sounding slightly disappointed.

Jade looks pleased. “Then it means I’m onto something, but the idea needs more work.”

“What did he mean the windows *lie* to you?” Sam asks.

Jade starts to explain her concept. “They just wouldn’t show you what was actually happening outside. It would start small, like maybe they show you a sunny day when it’s actually raining, but then it would escalate, start showing you scary things, like people lurking in your yard, or things you want, like a long-lost lover walking up the path to your house, but it’s never real.”

“So then,” Sam says slowly, “Why wouldn’t you just stop looking out the window?”

Jade tilts her head in consideration, then says, “Maybe that’s when the windows start trying to get your attention. Like that’s when people who aren’t there start *knocking* on your windows, trying to talk to you through them. The windows refuse to be ignored.”

Sam grimaces. “Sounds like an awful place to live.”

“I dunno,” Cat says. “Maybe you could make friends with the house and it can show you really beautiful things out the window all the time!”

Sam looks askance at Jade, who stoically says, “If I end up wanting to give this one a happy ending, that’s what I’d do, but.” Her mouth stretches into a sinister grin. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

Cat shivers slightly, moving closer to Sam, who wraps her arm tighter around her. “I love this idea,” Sam tells Jade.

“Did I tell you the one about the guy whose amputated limb starts growing back but it’s like slowly and painfully, like a tree branch?” Jade asks.

“No,” Sam says in fascination.

She and Jade swap creepy story ideas while Sam holds Cat, who she knows is staying not because she loves the thrill of a good scare, but because she feels safe with Sam there with her.

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When the party winds down, Sam and Cat hitch a ride with Tori and Jade to sleep everything off at Tori’s house, while Carly and Freddie drive back to Carly’s apartment. Freddie is clearly tired, judging by how quiet he is. Carly assumes he’s fallen asleep until he says something.

“Hey, so,” he begins, sounding hesitant. “Is that thing with you and Sam...still a thing?”

“You mean,” Carly begins slowly, “are we still dating?”

“Yeah,” Freddie confirms.

“We are,” Carly tells him.

“Oh,” he says. “Huh.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I just wasn’t sure,” he says. “You two seem the same as always, but Sam was also with Cat for a lot of the night.”

Carly shrugs. “Just worked out that way. At the last party we had at Beck’s, she was mostly with me.”

“So, that’s how it works? You just...take turns?”

Carly gives him a pained look. “Did you have to make it sound so *dirty*?”

“I didn’t mean to!” he protests quickly. “I just really didn’t know.”

Carly sighs, but she supposes she kind of owes Freddie an explanation. They really haven’t talked about it since she told him when it was brand new, and things have changed a bit since then. And everyone else at the party is in the loop. “We’re still together,” she confirms again.

“And Sam is still dating Cat. And for a little while, things were kind of hard. I felt like I wasn’t getting enough time with Sam, and Cat worried about being left behind. But then, Cat and I reconnected and we both feel good about how happy the other person makes Sam, so we feel more like a team now. I guess we’re all, like. Team Sam? If that makes sense.”

“I see,” Freddie says neutrally.

“...Okay, then,” Carly says, when Freddie doesn’t really have any other reaction.

“I’m just glad it’s working out for you,” he says.

He doesn’t say anything else, and Carly considers his perspective, how odd it seems for him that she and Cat could be so considerate of one another. She remembers, abruptly, how when she first told him about her reconnection with Sam, that he’d said he could understand a triad, but not a shared girlfriend, and how that had made her feel guilty, since she had just had to reject Cat. She wonders, now, if Freddie still feels the same way, and can’t resist asking, “Do you still think we’d be better off as a triad?”

Freddie shifts in his seat. “It doesn’t really matter what I think as long as you all are happy,” he replies evenly.

“That’s true,” Carly agrees.

After a moment, Freddie says in a slightly agitated tone, “I’m sorry, but *why* would you even ask me that?”

“I guess I was just thinking about it.”

“You were thinking about what?” he prompts. When Carly doesn’t reply, he adds, “I get that this is none of my business, and I’m not asking for my own curiosity. It just kinda feels like you have something you want to talk about.”

“Yeah, I...” They’re almost home, and Carly doesn’t speak until she’s parked in her designated parking spot. Freddie stays quiet, maybe sensing that she’s focusing on driving. When she puts the car in park, she turns to look at him. “I think I have feelings for Cat,” she admits. It’s like she needs to say it, needs to put it into words, just as a little release valve so it doesn’t feel like she’s going to be completely overwhelmed by her feelings.

His eyes widen. “Oh.” Carly’s mouth twists, and she doesn’t say anything, so then he adds, “But that’s not such a big deal, is it?”

“It feels like it is,” Carly replies.

“But what I mean is, you’re already in an open relationship, and you and Cat already have a connection, so, I mean, why wouldn’t you be honest about this?”

“Because if I’m wrong...then everything blows up,” Carly answers.

Freddie squints at her. “Wrong about what? Liking someone? You don’t know when you *like* someone?”

Carly can't exactly go into her history of thinking she felt differently about Sam under the full moon, the ways that certain aspects of her personality feel tied to an animalistic aspect of herself that is beyond Freddie's comprehension. Even though she can recognize now that some denial played a role in her treatment of Sam at the time, it *felt* very real to her, to only want her, to only *love* Sam, when the moon had its strongest influence over her. It isn't a mistake she wants to make in the opposite direction, to assume that strong feelings can't be a product of lunar influence, and discover, too late, that her feelings for Cat are very conditional.

She's already broken Cat Valentine's heart once. It isn't something she wants to do again.

So her Freddie-safe explanation is, "I fell in love with my best friend. Sometimes I'm still not sure if I entirely know the difference between a deep friendship and romance."

Freddie tilts his head to the side. "It really shouldn't shock you to know that I can relate to that."

Carly looks away. "Sorry."

"Don't be," he answers. "I liked you before we became best friends. With Sam...that was a lot more gradual...and to be honest I'm still processing some things about our relationship to this day, especially knowing how gay she is, and especially with the rather...confusing dynamics of our friendship."

"I can relate to confusing," Carly offers.

"But my point is, when things with me and Sam were on, I know how I felt. I know what I feel when things are *real*. Even if things maybe *weren't* real between us...they felt real to me."

Carly still thinks there's maybe an element he isn't understanding. "But you're not a girl," she says.

He raises his eyebrows. "Yeah, I'm well aware of that."

"I just mean, girl friendships, they can be weird and intense and just...*different*."

"I guess you're implying that guys don't have intimate friendships?"

"No! That's not what I mean at all! I just think it's more...common with girls. And maybe more confusing when you're queer."

Freddie looks away. "I guess," he finally says, his voice a bit uneasy. After a moment, he says in a quiet voice, "I guess maybe I can relate a little bit to not being certain of my feelings. But I think that's only happened when...they were feelings I didn't really *want* to have."

Now Carly is intrigued. "Really?" she asks. He merely nods, and she tries to think of who he could be referring to. Maybe Sam? But he's already explained how he felt about her. "Is this someone you met in college?"

“No,” Freddie answers, and before Carly can ask another question, he adds in a firm voice, “And it’s not something I really want to talk about.”

“Okay,” Carly says, feeling a little defensive, but then she pretty quickly puts the pieces together as she remembers learning that Freddie seemed to have a crush on Cat, only to find out that...Cat is very much taken by Sam. Cat is someone Freddie met when he was still in high school. It all fits.

And here’s Carly talking to him about having a crush on this same girl that he obviously had conflicted feelings about, feelings he tried to tell himself he didn’t want, maybe even feelings he’s still wrestling with today. And from his point of view, Carly at least has a *chance*. How could she be so selfish? *Especially* considering her own history with him.

“I’m sorry,” Carly says abruptly.

“For what?” Freddie asks warily.

“For leaning on you with...relationship stuff. It isn’t fair to you.”

Freddie looks confused. “I appreciate the apology, but I promise you it isn’t necessary. We’re friends, Carly. I accepted a long time ago that we’d never be more than that and I don’t want us to be. I’m always willing to be a listening ear for you.”

“Thank you,” Carly answers. She feels like Freddie is being honest, but she also can’t help but wonder if he’d insist that he’s fine when he isn’t. He’s obviously hiding something, even if it turns out it’s something that isn’t any of Carly’s business. She wants to push back a little, to insist that if she can confide in him, he can confide in her, but it just isn’t in her nature to be quite so blunt about it. So she says, “I hope you know that you can always talk to me, too.”

“I know,” Freddie smiles wanly. “Maybe after I get some sleep.”

“Oh, god, yeah, I’m tired, you must be exhausted,” Carly says, turning off the car and unbuckling her seatbelt. They head upstairs and both get ready for bed.

Freddie is already breathing deeply and evenly as Carly gets in bed, and just stares at the ceiling for a little while. Telling Freddie had made her feelings clearer, in a way. They’re *real*, or at least, they *feel* real. The thought of Cat’s warm, dark eyes, sparkling with laughter, give Carly butterflies. She thinks of the sensation of her hugs, the strength of them, the vanilla and floral scent of her, like kindness and...*integrity*. The ease with which she won Carly over, the way Cat’s presence, her support, her admiration feels *palpable*, like Cat *herself* can give Carly some kind of...*legitimacy* or *purpose*.

“Oh, shit, I’ve got it bad,” she whispers, realizing the intense turn her thoughts have taken.

“If you’re whispering to yourself in the dark, yeah you do,” Freddie mutters tiredly.

Carly almost jumps. “I thought you were asleep.”

“Almost.”

“Sorry. I’ll be quiet.”

Freddie merely grunts in acknowledgement. Carly turns onto her side. She knows that... strong feelings *like* love aren’t rational, but she certainly isn’t ready to use such terms yet. And she knows she still needs time, to sit with these feelings.

She decides, at this moment, that she needs to see how she feels about Cat during the new moon.

If there’s any chance of making something of the same mistake she made with Sam, if there’s any chance of breaking Cat’s heart again, Carly wants to ensure she can avoid it completely.

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Freddie stays with Carly for a few days, then switches to staying over at Sam and Cat’s. Despite Sam’s complaints, Cat thinks it’s ultimately fine. She and Sam have a chance to connect with each other during the evenings at the beginning of the week when Freddie stays with Carly, and Cat finds herself seeking ways to entertain Freddie one night when he’s staying with them, and Sam goes off to visit Carly. They’d all gone to West Hollywood as a group that day, but Andre and Robbie both had to work in the evening, so the group had dispersed in the late afternoon. So far, summer days with their friends either involve some adventure during the day with evenings at home, or gatherings and parties in the evening after people finish whatever they need to do during the day. But almost every day has included something fun, which has already made the summer feel full and wonderful.

“You really *are* just...okay with them, aren’t you?” Freddie asks after Sam leaves. He seems a little astonished by how little Cat had reacted to Sam informing them that she’s going to hang out at Carly’s for a few hours and she’ll see them later.

To be fair, she and Sam had discussed this earlier, and Cat had already agreed to the plan and assured Sam that she would be fine hanging out with Freddie by herself. “Of course I am!”

“Sorry, I’m not doubting you. I guess it just still seems weird for Sam to just, like, announce she’s going to see her other girlfriend and you to just say, ‘okay, have fun!’”

Cat frowns a little, mostly at Freddie’s attempt at an impersonation of her. “I love them both and I want them to be happy,” Cat says succinctly. It feels like she’s had to repeat this a lot lately, and it’s getting a little annoying. Sure, she guesses it’s *nice* that people are concerned about her feelings. Maybe a month or so ago that would’ve been really helpful, if they’d been ready to tell people. Or maybe it would’ve just made Cat feel more resentful, with everyone’s pity and sympathy heaped on her. Right now, though, she mostly just wants people to actually *listen* when she says she’s satisfied and even *happy* with her arrangement.

“Seems like there’s a lot of that going around,” Freddie murmurs.

“A lot of what?” But then Cat thinks she understands. “Love?” Freddie just shrugs. “Well, they say it makes the world go round,” Cat offers.

“Something like that.”



Well, Freddie's being a bit weird, so Cat figures they can just change the subject. "What do you want to watch?"

A few days later, Spencer comes to town. Sam is clearly excited, both because it means the end to their hosting Freddie and because, as she admits to Cat, she's actually pretty excited to see Spencer.

"He was just always a really good guy," Sam tells her, fondness in her voice. "He was...I dunno. The only stable adult in my life, really. I mean, he barely had his shit together personally, but like, he kept a roof over his and Carly's head, he kept food in the house, he supported us with anything we wanted to do. He's just a really, really good guy."

"I can't wait to meet him!" Cat says excitedly

They're supposed to help him move into his apartment when he arrives that afternoon. He's subletting a one-bedroom unit closer to the heart of the city, near the La Brea Tar Pits, and he and Socko are driving down together in Socko's RV. The apartment is furnished, but Spencer has evidently filled the RV's storage space with his clothes as well as a plethora of potential materials to use for his sculpture, something that is still in the development stages of creation.

Not surprisingly, though their other friends were made aware of Spencer's arrival, no one else has really jumped to offer to help them move him in. Jade puts it succinctly to Sam: "If he's just got boxes, it's not going to take long. We'd just be in the way of you guys reminiscing with him. Call us when he's down to let us throw a party at his place." Which, Cat supposes that's fair enough. She's a little worried she'll be in the way herself, among this tight-knit group.

She expresses this much to Sam, who assures her immediately that she'll be fine, that Sam wants her there, and that she'll love getting to know Spencer. But Cat isn't so sure, so she texts Carly, too.

**Are you sure it's okay for me to come  
with you guys to Spencer's new apartment?**

The reply is quick and reassuring.

**Of course! You don't even need to ask!**

Cat wants to at least add some context, to explain why she asked.

**I just didn't want to get in the way  
of a reunion with you and your brother**

She understands what it feels like to be separated from a brother that you love. She could imagine it would be odd to bring a stranger with her the first time she sees her brother again. Though, now that she thinks about that, she'd want to bring Sam. But this is Carly's brother, and she and Carly aren't dating.

But Carly doesn't seem to have the same concern.

**You definitely won't be in the way**

**Besides, you helped get him this job!**

**He wants to meet you!**

**And I want you there**

Well, if both Carly and Sam want her there, Cat feels better about it.

It's around dinner time when they get confirmation that Spencer is almost to his temporary new home, and they all drive out to meet him, with Sam and Cat in one car, and Carly riding with Freddie so she can navigate for him. But it's pretty easy to figure out where to go once they turn onto Spencer's street, because Socko's RV is just double-parked, right in the middle of the street.

Sam doesn't appear very concerned or surprised, and simply finds her own parking spot and hurries over. They've apparently arrived before Carly and Freddie do, because Spencer is standing by himself on the sidewalk parallel to the RV, a backpack slung over his shoulder, looking down at this phone. "Spencer!" Sam calls.

"Sam! Hey!" he cries, shoving his phone in his pocket and holding out his arms. To Cat's surprise, Sam actually gives him a bear hug, something Cat has seen her actively *avoid* with every other human on the planet.

It doesn't last very long, which at least seems on par for Sam, and she gestures to Cat. "This is Cat," she tells Spencer. They're purposely keeping it simple for now. Later on, when Carly is there, too, they're planning to tell Spencer more fully about the dynamics of their relationships.

"Hi!" Cat greets cheerfully. Spencer is *tall*. She doesn't know why she didn't expect that.

Spencer's eyes widen. "Carly told me you were coming! You're the one who got me this job!"

"Yeah!" Cat says excitedly. "I always thought your sculptures looked really cool back when I used to watch *iCarly*!"

"That's not even my *best* work!" Spencer scoffs. He looks around. "Hey, wait, where's Carly?"

"She should be here any minute. She drove separately with Freddie," Sam explains. She squints past Spencer. "Where's Socko?"

"Oh, he called a WeDriveU to go grab some groceries for me."

"Good plan," Sam nods. "Well, do you have your keys? Should we start hauling up—"

"Spencer!" they hear Carly call from down the street.

"Carly!" Spencer begins sprinting toward her with a youthful, energetic enthusiasm, and the momentum of him and his heavy backpack nearly bowls Carly over. Cat suspects it's only her unnatural werewolf strength that keeps her on her feet, holding onto her brother, who lets go after a moment to shout, "Freddie!" and grasp Freddie in much the same way, without the running start.

"Hey!" Freddie laughs. He keeps the hug short, seeming to have to wriggle a little to extract himself. He looks like he's trying to stand a little taller as he looks up at Spencer. "So, I guess we're gonna be roommates for a while, huh?"

"Yeah we are!" Spencer's enthusiasm is infectious. "Come on, you guys! Let's go check out our new place. Oh, grab a box or two while you're at it, will you?"

Inside the RV, wedged into corners and stacked in the seating area, are boxes and duffel bags. Cat picks up one inexplicably labeled "gears and balls" and follows the line of people into the apartment building.

It's a first floor apartment, which is at least nice in that they don't have to climb any stairs. Freddie looks around as they step in. "Well, it's at least bigger than Carly's apartment," he says brightly.

"Hey!"

"Yeah, I told Dad I needed the extra space to work on sculptures," Spencer says easily. "But don't worry! We'll find room for you, Freddie."

"Uh huh." Freddie sounds much less optimistic now.

Spencer commandeers the bedroom, which does make some sense since he's the one actually renting the place. Or, his dad is. Which, Cat is in the same boat, she's not exactly going to judge another adult for having a parent help them with rent, especially in a city as egregiously expensive as Los Angeles. Most of the boxes get stacked into a corner of the bedroom, which

doesn't leave much floor space for Spencer, but he starts pushing things together and stacking a few boxes outside his door. Meanwhile, the rest of them help Freddie carry up his couple of bags.

"Okay, so," Spencer says, "I'm going to need the bedroom and *maybe* this corner over here after I move the desk a little closer to the TV stand." He gestures toward the living room area. "Which means, Freddie, you can totally use the desk and the couch is all yours!"

"Why don't you share the bed?" Carly asks. "It's a queen, isn't it?"

"That's...a little too close for comfort," Freddie grimaces. "I'm fine with the couch."

Carly glances over toward Sam and Cat and rolls her eyes. "I forgot. Boys can't touch."

"Boys can touch!" Spencer protests, but then adds quickly, "If they want to. And Freddie and I don't want to."

"Wait, did you share your bed with Freddie?" Sam asks Carly, sounding horrified.

"No!" Carly protests immediately.

"Well, why not, if it's not a big deal?" Spencer challenges.

"Because—because—it's *weird* for a girl and boy!" Carly sputters.

"Why? Because of sex? Guys can have sex with each other, too, you know," Spencer points out.

"Oh my god, I *know* that!" Carly sounds absolutely mortified.

"Okay, but I'm not having sex with *anyone* here, so, I'm not sharing *anyone's* bed," Freddie announces, looking distinctly humiliated himself.

"I was only trying to say you can share a bed and *not* be having sex with the person," Carly mumbles.

Freddie raises his eyebrows. "So you'd be fine sharing a bed with, say, Cat?"

Carly glares at him. "Hey!" Cat protests, feeling like she's the butt of some joke here, but she doesn't know how. Sam folds her arms, regarding her two friends, as if waiting to find out whether she needs to intervene.

"I'd be, you know, fine with sharing a bed with Cat," Carly finally says, after some minor sputtering.

She doesn't sound entirely truthful. One thing that's fairly obvious about Carly is that she doesn't lie well. Cat feels a sinking feeling. She's worked hard to rebuild her friendship with Carly, but it seems like Carly is still uncomfortable with her. Maybe because she knows that Cat once had feelings for her. Well, Cat has made every attempt to make sure that Carly

doesn't realize she *still* has feelings for her, but maybe she hasn't even been successful with *that*.

But just as Freddie claims the couch by dropping his pillow and blanket onto it, Spencer answers his phone. "Hey, Socko. What? Oh, damn, okay. You know what, let me send Freddie out." He hangs up. "Socko says they're about to tow the RV, but he's here with our groceries. Can you run out and get them?" he asks Freddie.

"Sure, I'll be right back," Freddie hurries out the door.

Cat notices the way Sam and Carly glance at each other, as if wondering whether this is the only window of opportunity they'll have to really talk to Spencer candidly. Almost immediately, though, Freddie is back with the bags of groceries, which he unceremoniously drops on the limited kitchen counter space.

"Socko's driving around the block. I'm going to see if I move my car if that will give Socko enough room to park the RV on the street."

"Good idea!" Spencer encourages. He heads over to the kitchen to look in his grocery bags.

As soon as Freddie is gone, though, Carly says, "Hey, Spencer? Can we talk to you about something?"

"Fire away, kiddo." He's still rummaging around in his plastic grocery bags.

"It's important," Carly adds. "And actually, maybe, it might be kind of a lot."

Spencer turns, looking serious and concerned. "What's going on?" he asked, already abandoning his groceries.

"It's not a *bad* thing," Carly assures him. "It's just, maybe, a lot of information and, I don't entirely know how you're going to feel about it."

Spencer looks between all three of them. He looks puzzled, but attentive, and finally says, "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

Carly looks over at Sam. "Where do I start?"

"Start with you," Sam suggests.

Carly nods, then turns to Spencer. "I've wanted to tell you this for a while. I was kind of keeping it a secret, but then things changed, and I felt like I didn't have a reason to tell you, but I still should have told you." She takes a breath. "I'm bisexual," she says.

Spencer tilts his head to the side slightly, his eyebrows rising mildly. "Oh. Oh!" he says. "Oh, huh. I don't know why I didn't see that coming." But then he smiles. "Hey, that's great. You know I one hundred percent support you, right?"

"I was going to tell you when I turned eighteen. Because...I was dating Sam for like most of high school."

Spencer shakes his head and chuckles. “Okay, that one I did kinda see coming.”

“How could you see that but not me being bi?” Carly asks, mildly incredulous.

“It’s more that Sam isn’t much of a surprise, and when you came out to me a second ago, I put the pieces together,” Spencer explains.

“Thank you?” Sam says uncertainly.

“It’s *definitely* a compliment!” Spencer assures her. “You were just always a kid that was kinda obviously gonna be queer, and it’s awesome that you were so authentic from a young age. That’s why I never really put much stock in you saying you had a crush on me.”

“What?” Cat looks over at Sam with surprise and interest.

“I don’t know any other way to be but just me,” Sam says plainly, not even addressing the detail about this supposed crush.

“So, wait, why were you gonna wait to tell me?” Spencer asks Carly, expression shifting to concern. “You didn’t think I’d...” he trails off, clearly not even wanting to voice a kind of coming out worst case scenario.

“No, no,” Carly assures him. “I guess it’s kind of...immature. I didn’t want you to not let Sam stay over once you knew we were together.”

“Oh, geez.” Spencer rubs at his face. “What a time for me to realize I *totally* messed up the whole sex education talk with you.”

“You mean when you handed me a bunch of pamphlets and told me if I had any questions to ask Granddad?” Carly asks pointedly.

“I didn’t know what else to do!” Spencer cries. “That’s about all Dad did for me. But I didn’t even *think* to include anything about sexuality or, like, *anything* queer! I just—you were so boy-crazy!”

“She was also pretty crazy about me,” Sam smirks, a bit cocky.

“Looking back, I see that *now*!” Spencer gestures between them wildly.

“Well, I figured it out just fine on my own,” Carly says. “And that’s all I’m going to say about *that*.”

“Thank god,” Spencer gulps.

“So then. I left for Italy. Sam and I broke up.”

“And I rode that motorcycle you gave me across the entire country. I went through every state,” Sam says, her voice full of pride and a sense of wistful reminiscence. “And then I ended up here. And I met Cat.” She turns and smiles broadly at her. “And I fell in love again.”

“I’m Sam’s girlfriend,” Cat tells Spencer.

“*Ohhhh*,” Spencer nods, looking between them. “Okay. I get it.”

“There’s more,” Carly says, after giving Spencer a moment to process.

“More *how*?” Spencer asks.

“So I came here for college. I reconnected with Sam. Things were still really rocky, we weren’t even sure we could be friends again. But we’re so close, it came so naturally to us. And then we realized...we were still in love.” Spencer’s expression is attentive, almost suspenseful. “So...” Carly drawls, “it turns out I’m *also* Sam’s girlfriend.”

Spencer looks between the three of them silently, nodding slowly. “I get it,” he says. “Okay, I get it. Wow. But you and Cat—”

“We’re just friends,” Carly says quickly.

“Really good friends,” Cat agrees pointedly, her tone almost defensive because of her earlier ruminations, but then she realizes how it sounds, and adds quickly, “But not like that!”

“Cat and I don’t have sex!” Carly agrees loudly.

“Okay,” Spencer nods slowly. “I hear you.”

“Um, so, yeah,” Carly says awkwardly. “I guess that’s it. I just thought you should know.”

“I’m glad you told me,” Spencer says seriously, and offers each of them a hug in turn. He looks uncertain. “Does Freddie know?”

“Yeah, he knows,” Carly confirms.

“Ah. Just wondering, since you waited until he left to tell me.”

“It’s just not always fair to talk about this kind of stuff with him.”

“Because he’s single?” Spencer asks, turning his attention back to the groceries on the kitchen counter.

“Among other reasons.”

But Freddie returns before Carly can elaborate. He frowns a little as he sees the still-full grocery bags. “There isn’t anything perishable in there, is there?”

“Probably,” Spencer says, completely unconcerned. “Where’s Socko?”

“Oh. Yeah, moving my car didn’t work. He left.”

“What?” Spencer looks upset. “Without even saying goodbye?”

“He says he’ll meet you for breakfast or lunch or something tomorrow before he starts for home. For now he’s just driving around until he finds a place to park for the night and he’s going to sleep in the RV.”

“Too bad, he could’ve totally slept here!”

“Where?” Carly asks doubtfully, looking around.

“In my bed,” Spencer says simply.

“Oh, I see, because you and Socko are boys who *want* to touch,” Sam quips.

Spencer just shrugs nonchalantly. “We’ve been best friends forever. It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve shared a bed.”

Cat sees the way Carly and Sam share a glance. Best friends sharing a bed certainly has a whole different meaning for them.

They order pizza and Freddie complains when they all sit on “his bed” to eat, but that’s because they’re exploring what channels and streaming services the TV in this sublet might have access to. Spencer is almost relieved when all the streaming services are signed out, because, as he says, he’s here to work, and he can’t afford to get distracted.

When it starts to get late, and Spencer starts unpacking, the girls decide to go home. Cat lets Carly sit in the front seat for the ride to her apartment.

“I think that went pretty well,” Carly observes.

“I always told you he’d be cool,” Sam tells her.

“I was never worried about him not being *cool*,” Carly retorts.

“He never said he wouldn’t have let me stay over,” Sam points out.

“Yeah, but you saw how horrified he was at the thought of me having a sex life. That would’ve been much worse if I were still in high school.”

“Yeah, he was horrified because he’s your *brother*. As far as I’m concerned, Melanie is still a virgin.” She pauses. “Actually, knowing her, she probably still is,” she says wryly.

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Cat chides Sam lightly.

“I didn’t say there was.” Amused blue eyes meet hers briefly in the rearview mirror. “I just mean, even if she’s not, she *is*, because siblings having a sex life is distressing.”

“Yeah, I didn’t love you insinuating that Spencer and Socko have sex, either, Sam,” Carly drawls.

“I never said that,” Sam says in a very straightforward tone.



“But you *implied*—you know what, never mind, I don’t want to keep thinking about it.”

Cat looks out the window and thinks about her own brother. She hasn’t spoken to him since he was institutionalized. She’s heard things from her parents, that he’s been doing well, taking his medication, and attending therapy learning how to cope with a world that isn’t built for him, how to cope with frightening symptoms that manifest within himself. He’s supposed to be released soon. She wonders if he and her parents might come back to Los Angeles. She doesn’t know if it would make much of a difference if they did.

But she does miss her brother. She wishes she could tell him about Sam. She wishes she could come out to him. She’s pretty certain he would be fine with it; they both grew up with her uncle and uncle in their lives, and same-sex couples always seemed as natural as anything. He just doesn’t know. So much has changed for Cat in the past couple of years, and her brother, who she’s always loved and admired in spite of his unusual and sometimes disturbing behavior, just hasn’t been a part of it. Her own *parents* barely have.

Though she supposes that the two people in the car with her right now can sympathize with having largely absent parents.

Not for the first time, she thinks back to that night about a week ago, at Beck’s party, when Carly had talked to her father on the phone and then cried from missing him so badly. The way Cat had offered comfort and...something had happened. Something that still makes Cat’s stomach jump a little when she thinks of it. There had been a moment, a *charged* moment between them, when a wild part of Cat had been certain Carly was about to kiss her.

But looking back on it *now*...Cat wonders if it had been her own imagination, and if Carly had somehow picked up on her desire in the moment, and *that’s* why she’s been a little weird ever since.

They drop Carly off at her apartment, and Cat looks away as Sam gives Carly a goodnight kiss in the front seat of the car. Once Carly gets inside her building, Cat settles into the front seat next to Sam, and Sam begins to drive them back to their apartment.

“You’re quiet,” Sam observes. “You alright?”

“Did you really have a crush on Carly’s brother?” Cat asks. It’s not at *all* what she’s been thinking about for most of this car ride home, but it is something she’s wondered about since it was mentioned.

“I dunno,” Sam answers, but she isn’t trying to be evasive, because a moment later, she adds, “He was—out of any guy, he was the *safest* one to have a crush on. Because I was way too young for him. But he was kind, and treated me well, and...I don’t know. Crush is probably the wrong word. I was grateful to him, I admired him a lot, and I felt safe around him.” She shrugs. “For some people, that’s probably enough to build something off of.”

“Sounds complicated,” Cat comments.

Sam chuckles. “It’s really not. It’s more like all feelings seem really big when you’re like, fifteen. But I was too busy with his sister, anyway. She made me feel a lot of those same

things *plus* I thought she was hot.”

“She is,” Cat agrees, a little wistful. “Sam, did Carly say anything about me? Recently?”

“Say anything?” Sam repeats, sounding a little taken aback. “Um, not that I can think of. I mean, nothing new, anyway. Why?”

“I guess I just...” She sighs. “It hurt my feelings when she said she wouldn’t want to share a bed with me.”

“She said she *would* share a bed with you,” Sam corrects.

“But she was lying. Wasn’t she?”

Sam shifts slightly in her seat, her eyes still on the road in front of her, but Cat knows that she’s right. “It’s hypothetical, anyway. Besides, she shared the couches at Tori’s with us.”

“I guess,” Cat mumbles.

“Why is this upsetting you so much?” Sam asks, nonplussed.

“Because I’ve been working so hard to rebuild our friendship and it feels like I’ve messed up.”

“What?”

Sam clearly isn’t understanding her, so Cat just spells it out. “I still really like her. Like, *really* like her,” she admits.

“You do?” Sam sounds intrigued.

“I really, really do,” Cat admits quietly.

“And...that’s why you think you’ve messed up?” Sam says, but it sounds more like she’s guessing than that she’s actually following Cat’s logic.

“Why else would she not want to be close to me? I must’ve made her uncomfortable or something.”

Sam looks askance at Cat. “Yeah, I don’t know where you’re getting that,” she scoffs.

“From what she said!” Cat insists.

“Okay, I agree with you that it didn’t sound like she was being totally honest there. But I know Carly *really* well, and I can kinda *read* her, like, with my nose, and I *know*, when she’s around you...she’s happy. She *likes* being around you. She likes *you*.” Sam shakes her head. “Since we’ve started to figure out how this can work for us, all together, she hasn’t been uncomfortable around you. Trust me.”

“Are you sure?” Cat asks.

“Pretty damn sure. But if you’re not sure, why don’t you ask her about it?”

It’s not the worst idea in the world. If she’s done something to upset Carly, Cat wants to know about it. Maybe there’s some innocuous reason she wouldn’t want to share a bed with someone she wasn’t romantic with. Now that she thinks about it, she’s heard Sam mention Carly’s CPAP machine. Maybe it’s that simple. And an explanation like that would make Cat feel much better. “Maybe I will.”

“Good,” Sam says. “I think you’ll be happy with her answer. Because trust me, Carly thinks you’re awesome.”

That makes Cat feel warm. Giddy, even. “I think she’s awesome, too,” she replies. She’s already feeling better. “And Spencer is awesome! I’m so glad I got to meet him!”

“Now you see why I spent so much time at their house as a kid,” Sam chuckles. “Well, that, and my house was the worst.”

Cat reaches to squeeze Sam’s thigh comfortingly. “That’s why our house right now is the *best*.”

Sam smiles, content and affectionate. “It really is.”

## Nectar & Happiness

It's still weeks until the next full moon, but Spencer asks Carly to show him where to buy wolfsbane anyway. Carly assumes he's going to stock up for as long as he's going to be in Los Angeles, but when he doesn't even want to go inside, it quickly becomes clear that he just literally wants to know where to go.

"We came all the way here, why not just stock up?" Carly asks, mildly incredulous.

"Because," Spencer says harshly, then looks worried. "I don't want to keep it in the house."

Carly raises her eyebrows. "Um, that makes no sense. We *always* had a stockpile at home. What changed?"

"I don't want Freddie to accidentally take some and die!" Spencer wails.

Carly frowns. Sure, she supposes that's always a risk with a toxic plant, but, "Then keep it somewhere safe and hidden like we used to. Freddie used to come over to the old apartment all the time and you never worried."

"But here is so much smaller and there are fewer places where Freddie isn't going to go!"

Carly rolls her eyes. "Just put it on a high shelf somewhere, he'll never reach it."

"I just don't want him to think they're, like, vitamins or something. Look at him! That guy probably eats like fifty supplements for breakfast!" Spencer exaggerates the size of his own shoulders in demonstration. He shakes his head. "I'll just come get what I need on the full moon," he decides.

"Whatever you say." But this reminds Carly of something she's been considering. "Speaking of which, how would you like to maybe...change, this full moon?"

Spencer goes very still. "What, like, *here*?"

"Well, not in my *car*," Carly says. "But, yeah. Here in LA. There's a great spot I go to every month. I'd love to show it to you."

"Oh, man, I don't know, Carly," Spencer says uncertainly. "It's been so long, I don't know if I'd feel safe."

"I'll be there. I'll be there and be human and look after you," Carly tells him.

"I don't know," Spencer murmurs uncertainly. "It's a new place."

"And it's a *great* place," Carly assures him. "You did this for me so many times when I was young," she implores him. "Please, let me return the favor for once? It would mean a lot to me."

Spencer smiles. It's a little weak, but Carly can tell she's convincing him. "Alright, what the hell," he laughs in a discomfited sort of way. "And for the other nights, I'll know to come here," he says with finality, a tone that's clearly meant to give himself some reassurance.

"Whatever you want," Carly placates him.

The next day is Monday, and as Spencer claims, he's here to work. And it seems to actually be true, because his agenda for most of the week involves meeting with the benefactor and other school officials to discuss the proposed sculpture, and then working on the sculpture in the evening at his apartment. As such, Carly doesn't expect to see him that much during the week.

Which is pretty much fine, because she has plans for most of the week with her friends. On Monday, Jade has gathered just about everyone to shoot some scenes in Tori's living room for an experimental short film she wants to work on before she tries a bigger project later in the summer. She has Freddie as her cinematographer and she walks everyone else through a largely improvised script about some friends at a party who gradually realize that Cat is someone who no one invited and no one knows just before she kills the host (Beck) and escapes. It's eerie and weird and Jade assures them it's more about atmosphere than dialogue. Tori also tells Carly that it's Jade testing things to try to figure out whether she can work with Freddie on anything longer and more stringent while he's here for the summer.

On Tuesday, Andre invites them all to a venue that's doing an eighteen and over open-mic night (though they all get a hand stamp signifying they can't purchase alcohol). They're mostly there to support Andre, who signed up in advance and who has a chance to perform one of his original songs, to the obvious delight of the crowd. Most of the other musicians are pretty good, too, so at least Sam isn't complaining like she might at a karaoke venue.

Wednesday is a bit of a reprieve, however; Tori and Jade have something special planned just for them that Tori doesn't elaborate on and Carly doesn't press her to. There's apparently some big announcement for some video game that Robbie and Freddie are both into, so Freddie is planning to go to Robbie's to watch it online, which, he says, also keeps him out of Spencer's hair for the evening. Beck claims to have something to do regarding the show he's going to start filming soon, but Carly suspects he's just hoping to have an excuse not to have to watch the nerdy video game thing with his boyfriend. And Andre has to work.

Carly wonders if maybe Sam and Cat might take the day to just spend some time with each other, or maybe Sam might suggest she come over to Carly's house. They've been busy enough these past few days that they haven't had much alone time, and though Carly obviously doesn't know exactly how frequently Sam and Cat have sex, she suspects that the time they've been spending with friends has cut into their time for intimacy, too.

Instead, Sam suggests that Carly come over and all three of them hang out. Which honestly sounds great to Carly.

She heads over in the early afternoon, thrilled at the prospect of spending time with her girlfriend and her crush. As she drives, she also considers the fact that...it's the new moon, that night.

Should she *say* something?

She'd told herself that she would wait to see if her feelings might change with the phases of the moon. And so far, they absolutely haven't. She doesn't think she's managed to let on to Cat how she's been feeling, but being around her makes Carly happy. Even just *thinking* about her makes Carly happy.

It's weird, in a way, but also not. When she was with Sam in high school, she'd date guys sometimes. Never for very long and certainly not seriously, but if she had a crush, she'd let herself indulge it for a time. So it's not as though having a crush while still being devoted to Sam is very new for Carly.

The thing is, and the other piece that gives her pause...the guys Carly dated were always more fun as a fantasy than in reality. That was another reason her connections with them tended to be so brief. She'd like them, she'd spend time with them, and then, she'd be over it, and she'd just want Sam. It had occasionally made her wonder if maybe she was less into guys than she thought, but there had been the one guy in Italy, the friend with benefits she saw for a while, that had proven to be an exception. She'd *liked* him, and those feelings had persisted for a while...until she found out he was cheating on his girlfriend with her, and *then* she was totally over him.

So maybe, just maybe, Carly is beginning to think that she *shouldn't* say anything to Cat, at all. Because what if the fantasy of Cat is greater than the reality?

The last thing Carly wants is to upset the balance of something that is *working* right now, to ask for more when she doesn't *need* it. She thinks she could be perfectly happy being Cat's friend, if it came down to it. That was something that wasn't possible for herself and Sam, given their history, but she and Cat don't *have* that history.

As long as it's working, there's no need to buck the system.

Besides, Carly tells herself. Maybe she should wait to actually get *through* the new moon, just to be *completely* sure about her feelings.

She can put this off.

She arrives at Sam and Cat's, and they hang out at the beach for most of the afternoon. They walk and talk, enjoying the sun and the ocean breeze that makes for a beautiful, mild very-late-spring day, they take off their shoes to dig their toes in the sand and dip them into the chilly surf...and then regret it when they have to pull socks back on their damp, sandy feet. Carly muses that the ocean is sometimes like a crush: better as a fantasy than reality.

They get tamales from a food truck along the boardwalk and eat them as they head back to Sam's car. Other than the sand in her socks, Carly is in a great mood: they have good food, it's a gorgeous afternoon, Sam's blue eyes sparkle in the sun and Cat's smile makes her heartbeat quicken.

It's moments like these that she's afraid to give up.

When they get home, Cat announces she's going to go to the bathroom to wash all the sand off her feet. Carly expresses that she'd like to do the same, and Cat tells her to use the guest bathroom and offers to lend Carly a pair of socks, which she accepts gratefully.

When they come out with sand-free feet in clean socks, Cat eyes Sam. "Sam," she orders, "Go wash your feet."

Sam shrugs. "I'm not really bothered by the sand."

"*I'm* bothered *knowing* you have sand on your feet," Cat replies.

"Yeah, now that she points it out, I kinda am, too," Carly admits.

Sam sighs like she's been asked to perform some kind of utterly exhausting athletic feat and trudges reluctantly back toward the master bathroom to wash her feet.

Cat smiles at Carly after Sam leaves the room. "She can be so stubborn," she comments.

"Yeah, she's always been that way," Carly agrees, shaking her head. It's often one of Sam's... less endearing qualities, but it makes her smile, all the same.

Cat takes a breath, like maybe she wants to say something, but then glances back toward the bedroom uncertainly. After a moment, Carly hears the water to the bathtub turn on, and Cat looks back at her. Her expression is guarded, concerned. "Hey, are we okay?" Cat asks her.

Carly actually rears back slightly because the question catches her so off guard. "We're great!" she tells Cat. "Why would you even ask that?"

"I just wanted to make sure I hadn't done something to make you uncomfortable, that's all," Cat says in a mild voice, looking away from Carly.

"You haven't," Carly assures her. She laughs nervously. "I was kind of worried *I'd* made *you* uncomfortable, to be honest," she blurts.

"Really?" Cat asks, then shakes her head. "How could you do that?"

"I don't know." It's Carly's turn to look away. "I know that sometimes it can still be a little... weird, with us both and Sam, and I'm always afraid I'm in the way."

"You're not," Cat assures her.

"Well, you've been nothing but amazing to me," Carly assures Cat. "We're fine, Cat."

Cat nods, her pensive expression giving the impression that perhaps she's nodding to herself, not at Carly. And then she says, "When we were at your brother's apartment, and Freddie asked if you would share a bed with me—" Carly's heart feels like it turns a somersault in her chest, "—you said you would, but, it sounded like you were lying. Maybe I'm wrong. But I thought it meant that maybe I had done something that didn't make you want to be close to me."

“You haven’t done *anything*,” Carly assures her, reaching out to touch Cat’s arm before deciding against it and withdrawing her hand. “That’s—I was feeling—that’s my own thing,” is what she settles on telling Cat. “It didn’t have to do with you or how I feel about it, it has to do with me. And, you know. My snoring and stuff. I can be sensitive about those things.” Elaborating probably just muddled the situation, but Carly hadn’t quite been able to just leave things there, it was like her mouth insisted on continuing to talk.

Cat still looks a bit uncertain, but she’s smiling. “Thank you. I don’t even know why I let it bother me. It’s not like it’s a big deal, or anything, some imaginary scenario when we might have to share a bed.” She laughs, though it’s pretty humorless.

Carly feels something like electricity flicker through her limbs. As if that very imaginary scenario isn’t one that’s been in her head *a lot* lately. She very nearly says something to that effect, but instead she just says, “I think we’d do fine, if it happened.”

Cat’s smile broadens. “Me too!” she answers.

Carly takes a deep breath, willing the urgency of her emotion to leave her. She *wants* to say something, but she’s not ready, but Cat just looks so *cute*, and Carly is filled with the overwhelming urge to take her into her arms and tell her they should go find out how they’d fit together in bed, right now.

She’s groping for an excuse to leave the room to take a moment to settle her thoughts when Sam comes sauntering back into the living room. “Alright, I did what you asked,” she grumbles, lifting a foot to wiggle it and show off her clean sock.

Carly seizes the opportunity. “Sam, can I talk to you for a second?” She shoots Cat a smile. “Sorry, I just thought of something. We’ll be right back.”

“Okay!” Cat says cheerfully. “I’ll make some coffee.”

Carly takes Sam’s elbow as she walks past her down the hall and Sam mumbles “*Geez*,” when she has to pick up her pace to follow Carly into the bedroom. Once inside, she eyes Carly skeptically. “I had no idea clean socks got you so hot,” she comments.

“What? No,” Carly laughs. “Although, yes, kiss me, but then we have to talk.” She indulges Sam’s kisses for a few moments before she pulls away. “I just realized I’ve been so stupid.”

Sam looks surprised. “You’re a lot of things, but that’s not a word I’d use to describe you.”

Carly eyes her dangerously. “Oh, really? What word *would* you use?”

“Naive, opportunistic, weak, temperamental, and sometimes too easily provoked,” Sam rattles off easily. Carly is stung, though, she thinks it’s also a pretty fair assessment of her flaws. She’s called herself every single one of these at one time or another. But Sam must see her anguish, because she quickly adds, “But you’re also the most fun person to be around and you have one of the biggest hearts of anyone I know, you’re smart as hell and game for anything, you’re organized and responsible, and you’re so goddamn hot, and I’d literally do anything for you.”



“Nice recovery.” Carly narrows her eyes at her, but the corner of her lip twitches into a smile.

“Also, don’t call my girlfriend stupid,” Sam adds, as if it just occurred to her.

“Huh?” Carly thinks she means Cat at first, then realizes. “Oh. Okay, fine, I’ve been *naive*.”

“How?” Sam asks.

“I *just* realized that I can talk to you about how I’m feeling about Cat. And you can tell me what I should do.”

“What you should do about *what*?” Sam asks. “What did Cat do?”

“Nothing!” Carly insists. She takes a breath. “Look, I...I realized a couple weeks ago that I’ve started to really develop feelings for her. Like, strong ones. Real ones.”

Sam’s eyes widen and she goes very still. “*Oh*.”

“I...can’t read your reaction at all,” she admits. “But I didn’t know what to do. I waited, to make sure it wasn’t just a full moon thing, but I’m still feeling the same way, and just being around her is making me stupidly happy, and...it didn’t occur to me until now that I could ask *you* whether I need to just *bury* this, or if I could tell her.”

Sam looks stunned, but she says in a clear, quiet voice, “Oh, you should tell her.”

“Are you *sure*?” Carly says emphatically. “Because I’m not just saying this here. And the last thing I want is to mess all of this up.”

“I’m sure,” Sam tells her. Her eyes scan Carly’s face. “You...don’t have to do it, like, *right now* if you’re not ready. But I think you should.”

But as much as Carly felt earlier like it was too big of a risk, she’s getting tired of tiptoeing around feelings that seem like they want to burst out of her, feelings that seem to *already* be affecting their dynamic if Freddie’s stupid question that was designed to fluster her had somehow made Cat feel bad. “No. I’m going to do it right now.” She reaches for Sam’s hand. “Will you be there?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Sam vows, grinning widely.

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It had been a little strange, the way Carly marched off to talk to Sam just after that conversation with Cat, in which Cat had been vulnerable with her and let her know about something minor that had hurt her, but Cat refuses to let it bother her as she makes coffee and puts cookies out on a plate for everyone. Maybe Carly just wanted to make out with Sam. Heck, *Cat* kind of wants to make out with Sam right about now. Maybe she’ll ask for a “private conversation” with Sam next.

But as Carly and Sam come out front from the bedroom hand in hand, there’s something very...*formal* about their posture and approach that makes Cat alert and somewhat wary.

“What’s going on?” she asks them, trying to keep her voice from signaling her apprehension.

“Babe,” Sam starts, “Carly has something she needs to tell you.”

“Oh. Okay,” Cat turns her attention to Carly, even more wary now. Is she about to hear that Carly *is* actually extremely uncomfortable with her and was just too scared to say it before?

“Cat,” Carly says, and there’s something about the way she says it that makes Cat feel warm, like the way her mouth forms the word is a caress, somehow. “I, uh. I’ve been realizing lately that...that I’m really falling for you.”

Cat can’t make sense of this, and her first reaction is a cold, furious disbelief. “That’s not funny.”

Carly balks, like she’s been struck, and looks to Sam for help, looking desperate and terrified. Sam looks incredulous. “She’s not joking,” she tells Cat.

Carly seems to realize what the disconnect is and turns back to Cat. “I’m not! I’m really, *really* not,” she insists.

“But you—wait.” Cat shakes her head. “I thought I wasn’t—I thought you couldn’t...see yourself with someone like me.”

“Things changed,” Carly says simply. She’s shaking her head imploringly. “I’m not just *saying* this because I’m trying to make you feel better, or I’m trying to make this easier on Sam and you or anything like that. I just honestly, *truly*, fell for you because of how *sweet* and *good* and *loving* you are. Not to mention that you’re funny, and *so* talented at everything I’ve seen you even attempt, and you’re just honestly *gorgeous*, I...” she trails off.

“Are you—” Cat turns to Sam. “Is she being serious?” she asks, scarcely daring to believe.

Sam simply nods, a smile slowly spreading across her face.

“When you asked me about how I was being weird about the question of sharing a bed with you,” Carly begins. “Freddie asked me that to mess with me. He knew how I was feeling about you.”

“Wait, *Freddie* knew?” Sam interjects.

Carly ignores her completely. “The truth is...the thought of sharing a bed with you was *too* exciting.”

Cat feels a shiver of desire slide down her spine. “I...I don’t know what to say,” she utters softly.

“Um,” Sam says quietly, “Maybe you can start with what you told me the other night in the car?”

“Oh!” Cat straightens slightly, realizing she’s just been given an *offer*. “I feel the same way about you, Carly,” she says, straightforward and heartfelt. “I thought that my crush was

fading when you and I weren't talking but the minute we reconnected...my feelings came back," she admits.

"Yeah?" Carly smiles at her.

"Does this mean we can...kiss?" Cat suggests quietly.

Carly looks at Sam, and Cat follows her lead and turns to Sam, too. Sam looks thunderstruck. "You can't honestly think I'm going to tell you that you two can't have this? After everything you've done for me?" She gestures between them. "Kiss, already, you absolute dumbasses."

"Asshole," Carly shoots over her shoulder at Sam as she takes an eager step toward Cat.

"Jerk," Cat agrees, looking into Carly's mirthful dark eyes before her gaze drops to her lips, which look *so soft* as they move toward her own, and—

Her lips, gentle and intoxicating. Her arms, holding Cat so carefully. Cat's eyes are closed and her breath has stopped and she feels frozen in bliss for just a moment, before she tilts her head to deepen the kiss with Carly, slipping her own arms around her to draw her closer.

It's *weird*, to kiss someone that much taller than her, to feel the difference in the tilt of her chin, in the tickle of Carly's hair against her cheek. Cat lifts herself up onto her toes, trying to even their heights, and Carly pulls back with surprised laughter, still holding onto her, eyes sparkling as she gazes at her.

Cat looks at Sam over Carly's shoulder. Sam is *glowing* with delight. "That was the hottest thing I've ever seen," she comments, looking like she's wiping a tear from under her eye, though Cat suspects it's a pantomime.

Carly smiles at her, elated and excited. Cat smiles back, and they dive back in, the passion already ramping up between them. Cat is no stranger to holding a crush close to her heart for a long time before it finds validation and connection. It had happened with Robbie, with disappointing results. It had happened with Sam, with intensely satisfying results, after a false start. And it's happening now with Carly, with explosive results.

It's *so much less* about sweetness and tenderness than her first kisses with Sam. Cat tugs Carly closer with a force that surprises them both, grasps the hair at the back of her head. It feels uncontrolled, needy, which is...exactly how Cat is feeling. Maybe it's because she's not a virgin anymore, but she has few concerns about taking things slow, about a steady pace. She wants to *inhale* Carly, to *consume* her, to just *experience* all of her, as quickly as possible.

But. She also recognizes that just because it's what she *wants*, it's not necessarily the best idea. Also, there are two other people here whose feelings she has to consider.

Instead she just focuses on Carly, on how it feels to *finally* kiss her, on the joyful leaping in her stomach, the thrum of her heartbeat in her ears, the force of the energy in her limbs. The way Carly pushes closer, the way Cat's fingers dig into Carly's back, the way Carly's hands rest on her hips. The way it feels *so different* from kissing Sam, both the utterly physical

reasons like Carly's height, the different texture of her hair and skin, the way she *smells* different, softer and more feminine than Sam. But it's also in the way that she feels almost more *pliant*, and not like she's holding back, the way it felt like Sam was, when they first started kissing. It's more like Carly has handed her the reins, like a beast exposing its belly and throat, an expression of trust and vulnerability.

It's difficult to explain, but Cat feels it as she backs Carly up against the patio door, as Carly's hands merely flex around her hips, like she's holding steady, holding on, not seeking to guide Cat's movements or quell her desires. It's *intoxicating*, this feeling of control, and it makes Cat wonder if they even have to stop.

But. Wait. They *have* to stop. Right?

Cat pulls away, taking in a deep breath, feeling lightheaded and energized all at once. It all still feels so *surreal*. "I don't want to stop kissing you," Cat tells her. She wants to talk more, to try to figure out where boundaries are, what everyone is okay with. Sam has just been standing and watching and as much as she's clearly stated how much she's into this...the last thing Cat wants is for Sam to feel left out, left behind, forgotten.

But all that flies out of her head when Carly replies, "Then don't."

They surge together again, at Cat's instigation, and she moans as Carly nibbles her lip, and Carly gasps at the sensation of Cat's palm sliding along her waist, her fingertips brushing past her ribs to her breasts. It's easy to lose track of time as they just kiss and touch each other, though it's all still over the clothes, as Cat realizes her height offers her the perfect position to press kisses along Carly's neck. The sound of her stifled, whining exhale makes Cat's knees weak.

There's a soft, breathy sound from Sam, like a sigh or maybe a gasp, and it's enough to tear Cat and Carly away from each other so that they turn to her, almost in unison. "Sorry," Cat gasps out.

Sam still looks very attentive. She shakes her head, "No, don't be sorry. I get that this isn't about me, and it *is* really fun to watch."

"But..." Cat prompts, sensing that Sam has more to say.

"You feel left out," Carly finishes.

"I'm fine," Sam insists.

But Carly reaches for her, and tugs Sam closer, and kisses her, despite the fact that she's still pinned bodily against the door by Cat, whose hand still covers one of Carly's breasts. Cat watches, awed, as they kiss passionately right in front of her, and after a few moments, they part, and Sam turns to her, and kisses her, with just as much fervor, and this time, Cat is *certain* she can taste Carly on her lips, and it's *dizzying*.

One of Carly's arms has moved from around Cat to encircle Sam's waist, drawing the three of them ever closer, and in a moment, Carly is kissing Cat again, while Sam nuzzles Carly's

shoulder. “You know,” Cat hears Sam murmur, “She goes crazy when you grab her ass.”

Cat realizes that Sam is talking about *her* just before Carly’s other hand slides lower, past Cat’s waist, to grasp her ass, and Cat feels her abdomen clench with pleasure at the sensation. She disengages from the kiss to gasp out a moan, resting her forehead against Carly’s chest, until the sensation of Sam kissing her cheek coaxes her to turn her head and kiss Sam some more.

As she and Sam kiss, while she and Carly grope each other, Cat starts to have a sense of just how things are going, and how quickly they could escalate, and how much she *absolutely* wants them to.

“Wait,” Cat breathes. She looks up at Carly, who gazes back at her with searing dark eyes. “We’re girlfriends now, right? All three of us?”

Carly nods, seeming like it takes her a moment to become verbal. “That’s what I want,” she agrees.

“That’s what I’ve always wanted,” Sam adds.

“Okay,” Cat says softly. “Then, are we...moving too fast?”

Carly exchanges a look with Sam. “I want what you want,” she tells Cat.

“I don’t think I want to stop,” Cat whispers.

For a moment, the words hang there, and it feels like they heat the room by a few degrees as the three of them allow them to sink in. Then Sam says, “We should go to the bedroom,” in a low, strained voice.

They move almost as a collective unit, a bit ungainly as they bump into each other and step on each other as they try to stay too close, not wanting to stop touching each other as they make their way down the hall to the bedroom.

Cat wonders, briefly, if the fact that this is very much a space that belongs to her and Sam is going to make a difference. But quickly, she remembers that Sam and Carly have already kissed in here, and she draws Carly close to her to christen the space with their own kisses, too.

They get so lost in their kisses that it’s hard to progress beyond it, and Sam comes up behind Cat and moves her hair to kiss her neck, and moments later, when Cat kisses Carly’s neck, she realizes that Sam and Carly are kissing over her shoulder. The sensation of being sandwiched between the two of them is *delightful*.

She manages to slip her hand up Carly’s shirt, seeking to touch her, but as her arm starts to take the shirt with her, Sam reaches around to help, and the three of them remove Carly’s shirt entirely.

Cat focuses on all the smooth, bare skin that is suddenly *right* in front of her, and immediately follows her urge to press kisses all along the tops of Carly’s breasts. She feels

Carly's hand in her hair, Sam's hand against her stomach, Sam's hips against her ass, hears the two of them kissing over her head.

But as she continues the trajectory of her kisses, the fact that Carly is still wearing a bra starts to feel stupid. "You don't need this," she tells Carly, reaching around her body to unlatch her bra.

Carly laughs. "She's demanding," she comments to Sam.

"She's not always like that," Sam replies, sounding a bit awed.

"I like it," Carly murmurs, putting enough distance between herself and the other two to pull her bra straps down her arms and toss the garment away.

And then Cat zeroes in on the breasts she now has unfettered access to.

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A part of Sam wonders if she should step away. A part of Sam thinks she should *probably* let these two have this, have their privacy, enjoy their intimacy on their own terms.

But a bigger part of Sam doesn't want to miss a moment of this. Sure, she'd leave if she were asked to, but she's not going to volunteer.

She literally can't believe that she was fantasizing just, like, two weeks ago about what it would be like to enjoy sensuality and intimacy with *both* of her girlfriends at the same time, and now it's *happening*.

Though she also recognizes how much it's ultimately *not* about her right now. She's just grateful to be along for the ride.

Maybe that knowledge helps, a little, with the realization of just how *strange* it is to see Cat press her face so *wantonly* against Carly's breasts. Kissing is one thing, and while this is certainly hot, too, there's a part of Sam that feels like Cat is horning in on something that's *hers*.

But moments later, she's back to kissing Carly, and decides she *definitely* doesn't care what Cat wants to do with Carly's body. Carly's *hot*. Cat's *hot*. This is fucking *scorching*.

Sam lets her hand travel up the back of Cat's thigh, beneath the hem of her dress, where she not so gently grasps her ass over her underpants. Cat moans against Carly's breast and pushes back against Sam's hand, making her grin.

Carly pulls away at the sound Cat makes and looks down at her. Sam can see her gaze shift from watching Cat's face to noticing where Sam's hand is. She grins ferally. "Oh," she murmurs.

"Yeah, I love when she wears skirts and dresses," Sam comments with a leer, kneading the flesh beneath her hands.

“I can see why,” Carly murmurs. “Maybe I want to do that.”

Cat stands up straight and frowns at them both. “You don’t have to talk about me like I’m not here,” she scolds. “Carly, if you want to touch me, *do it*.”

Carly eyes widen slightly and she glances over at Sam, who withdraws her hand and moves to the side, situating herself more behind Carly, so that when Cat kisses Carly again, Carly is able to use both hands to slip beneath her skirt and cover her ass with both palms.

Cat whimpers, and Sam nuzzles Carly’s neck, one hand slipping between her two girlfriends to tease at Carly’s nipples with her fingers, making Carly moan into her kiss with Cat. The room is redolent with the inevitability of sex.

Just as Sam is about to move back over to Cat to begin unzipping her dress, Carly beats her to it, breaking her kiss with Cat to ask, “Can I take this off?”

“Yes,” Cat answers, almost impatiently, and this time Sam does move, placing herself back next to Cat so she can move Cat’s thick locks of hair over her shoulder and away from her zipper. She presses a few reassuring kisses onto Cat’s forehead, her temple, her lips, as Carly unzips her dress, which within moments pools at Cat’s feet.

Sam watches the way Carly stares at Cat, the way she swallows and murmurs, “Wow.”

“Why are we still standing?” Sam asks abruptly. She’d kinda thought they were coming back to the bedroom to, you know, *get in bed*, but they’re still just standing in the middle of the room kissing and undressing each other.

“Good point,” Carly agrees. She looks around at the two beds. “Um.”

“Come on,” Cat urges, leading the way to her own bed. On the way, she divests herself of her own bra, so that when she turns around and perches on the edge of her bed wearing nothing but her socks and underwear, Carly has to fully stop to stare at her once again.

“Go on,” Sam nudges her.

She considers the fact that she’s still fully dressed as Carly half-crouches next to Cat on the bed, leaning into her to kiss her as her hands run over her breasts, exploratory movements. She *gets it*. They’ve both seen her naked countless times, but this is brand new to the two of them, they’re *excited* to see each other’s flesh bared, to explore and experience it, whereas Sam doesn’t have that same fresh newness.

But she can’t deny the strangely *protective* impulse that runs through her when she watches Carly lean down to press her mouth against Cat’s breasts. No, it’s more *defensive*.

It takes Sam a moment to realize that she’s feeling a certain kind of *jealousy*. Not really of either of them but in the sense that...she’s the only person who has *been with* Cat this way, who has *touched* her like this, and that’s about to change, and maybe a selfish part of Sam *liked* being Cat’s one and only, not just the only person Cat was devoted to, but the only

person who has ever made Cat feel desired and loved and cherished. The only person, aside from Cat herself, who has ever made Cat *come*.

And she's about to lose that exclusive status.

She remembers Cat's struggles with her own virginity, and the idea that she was *losing* something that could never be recovered. Sam understands that idea, that there's certainly no going back after they all do this together. But she remembers how Cat had told herself that it wasn't just something she lost. She had *gained* so many new experiences with the price of her virginity. New ways of being intimate, new heights of pleasure.

So Sam thinks about it like that. She's about to be in a threesome. The three of them will be able to have sex in all sorts of configurations after this. This is going to lead to more pleasure, more love, more *beauty* in Sam's life. And honestly, even right now, being slightly apart from the action, it's *still* a lot of fun for Sam to watch the two people she's *so* familiar with enjoy one another, discover the bits and pieces of what she already knows about them. The newness is *their* experience, and in important moments like this, Sam is happy to largely be a spectator.

Like when Cat lifts her hand to roll Carly's nipple between her fingertips, producing a moan much like the one Sam coaxed out of her moments ago.

Cat twists to begin bearing Carly down onto her back, kissing along her collarbones, her chest, while her hands begin to work the button on Carly's jeans, when Carly murmurs, "Wait."

"Hmm?" Cat asks, half sitting back up to give Carly space.

"How is Sam still fully dressed?" Carly asks.

Cat turns to look at her. "Why are you still dressed?" she asks Sam.

"It's not like you two are naked," Sam challenges.

Cat and Carly look at each other and Sam can see Carly's eager grin, the flush of Cat's cheeks. But Cat stands up and approaches Sam. "Join us," she requests, reaching for Sam's shirt.

Sam allows her shirt to be removed, and for Cat to kiss her as Carly stands up to finish kicking off her jeans. Sam reaches behind her back to unlatch her bra while Cat kisses her, and Carly comes up behind Cat and reaches between their bodies to unbutton Sam's pants, coaxing her to be as nearly naked as they are.

Sam manages to toss away her bra and step awkwardly out of her pants while still kissing Cat as much as she can, leaving them all down to just socks and underwear as she and Carly circle their arms around Cat and each other.

Cat pulls away from Sam to lean her head back against Carly's shoulder. "I like this," she purrs.



Carly lowers her head to kiss her pulse point, and Sam leans over to flick her tongue over Cat's nipple. She groans in response, gripping onto both of them, gasping for air as they both continue their movements.

Sam knows what she wants to happen, and she's pretty sure she knows what the other two want, but really, none of the action has been...between the legs yet. Maybe they're moving too fast. She lifts her head. "Do you want to keep going?"

She's mostly asking Cat, because she knows that of the two of them, Cat tends to struggle the most with her sexuality. Perhaps Carly senses this, because she lifts her head to turn her attention to Cat, too.

Cat blinks open her eyes. "Are you really asking me that right now?" she asks breathlessly.

Sam glances at Carly, then says, "Yes? I don't—we don't want to move too fast." She feels confident speaking for Carly in this moment as well.

"I want what you want," Carly reminds Cat of her earlier statement.

"What makes you think what I want has changed?" Cat asks. She turns in their arms to look up at Carly. "I want you. I want you *both*. I'm tired of waiting."

Carly meets Sam's eyes as she looks past Cat and Sam can see the mirth in them. But then Cat is kissing Carly, and coaxing her toward the bed, and Sam follows.

Carly gets backed onto the bed first, and sits down on the edge once her knees hit the edge of it, and Cat reaches for her underpants to begin to tug them down her body. Sam realizes how quickly this is all going to happen as Carly reaches for Cat's, too, and figures she'll just pull her own off. It certainly doesn't need to be a *thing* for her, in this scenario.

Carly stretches out onto the bed on her side, as close to the wall as she can get, and gestures for Cat to come closer. Cat does, climbing onto the bed to face her, the two of them side by side, just enough space between them for them to look at each other.

The bed is kind of too narrow for Sam to join them like that, so she sits at the foot of the bed, watching them.

"God, you're so pretty," Cat utters softly, her hand tracing along Carly's shoulder and along her ribs and hip. Sam doesn't disagree, like *at all*, but she has a strange pang of jealousy as she hears it. It's not really a word either of her girlfriends use for her, mostly because they know it'll make her cringe and scoff. It's just never felt like a word that *suits* her. That doesn't mean she doesn't wish she *felt* like she was pretty sometimes.

Carly smiles and ducks her head a little with the compliment. "You're *beautiful*," she returns, "I've always thought so." Another mild pang. But it's fine. Sam will take sexy or hot over either of those two terms any day.

Then they're kissing, wrapping their arms around each other on the bed, and there's not much Sam can do but watch as their legs entwine, their hips press closer, seeking contact.

But then Carly is leaning, bearing Cat down onto her back, and she's half on top of her as her hand caresses its way slowly down Cat's body until her fingers rest on her inner thigh.

She pulls back to look down at Cat, as if seeking consent. Cat communicates it by giving the barest nod and kissing her, briefly, before gazing into Carly's eyes as her fingers dip between Cat's legs.

Sam watches as Carly's fingers part Cat's folds, as Cat parts her legs further, hears the intake of Cat's breath, and keenly watches the first exploratory stroke of Carly's fingers through glistening flesh.

Cat lets out a breathy sound that isn't quite a moan and reaches for Carly's shoulder, then pulls her down for another kiss. When they pull apart, Cat turns hazy eyes to her. "Sam," she murmurs, "She's—*touching me*," she gasps, sounding almost disbelieving.

"I can see that," Sam smirks. She crawls up, one leg off the bed completely because there just isn't room, to kiss Cat, a long, hungry kiss, before she murmurs, "Enjoy her," and resettles herself toward the foot of the bed.

She keeps watching, hand on her own breast, seeing the way the movements of Carly's hand become more purposeful, rhythmic, hearing the reactionary sounds Cat makes. Finally, Cat gasps out, "I want to—I need to feel—more—" and breaks off into a keening whimper.

"I think she wants you to finger her," Sam translates for Carly. "Right?" she addresses Cat.

"Mmhmm," Cat manages, nodding.

"Oh my god," Carly says, very quickly and very quietly, clearly eager. She takes a breath and her hand pauses its movements for a moment before one finger slips lower, and Sam watches with bated breath as the finger sinks inside of Cat.

Cat lets out a soft moan, the kind that manages to be high-pitched and sweet but also throaty, with a rasping edge to it that has always driven Sam wild. It sounds so *needy* and *shameless*, like the sensation of Carly inside of her is too potent to bear yet not enough. Cat's eyes flutter open and she reaches for Carly again to kiss her, hard and messy, and Sam can hear their teeth clash momentarily.

It's quite a scene, with Cat on her back, legs spread, one dangling off the edge of the bed now, the slow, rhythmic motion of Carly's finger moving inside of her, as Carly stretches out alongside her, kissing her, occasionally dipping her head down to flick her tongue over Cat's breasts, too.

It gives Sam an idea. She leans forward, over Cat's hips, and lets her own tongue dart out.

It's not easy to reach Cat's clit like this, mostly because of the angle of Carly's hand. Carly lifts her hand, withdrawing from Cat entirely, who whines in protest, as Sam angles her face as best she can to reach her target. She can see Carly slide back inside, feel Cat arch a little with the sensation, as she and Carly work together to provide Cat with pleasure.

But Sam has to withdraw after a minute or so, because it just isn't quite working, she doesn't have the angle or the leverage to do much more than struggle to flick her tongue with any kind of rhythm or precision. But when she stops, Cat gasps out, "But I want *both* of you."

Sam looks at Carly, who looks back at her hungrily, biting her lip. Sam's gaze falls between Cat's legs where, *oh*, Carly now has *two* fingers inside her. That must've happened when she readjusted her hand to try to give Sam access to Cat with her mouth.

"Hold still," Sam tells Carly. Because suddenly the hottest thing she can imagine is to be inside of Cat *with* her. To take away the sting of jealousy by *sharing* the experience.

She turns her hand so it faces the opposite direction as Carly's hand and, knuckles bumping, slowly and carefully slips her own finger inside of Cat, beneath Carly's.

Cat's eyes fly open; she and Carly are both watching her keenly. She looks at them, "You're both—" she breaks off into a deep breath.

"Is it okay?" Sam asks her.

Cat nods quickly, "It feels amazing," she tells Sam.

"Do you want more?" Sam asks. She finds it much easier to work with two fingers.

At Cat's nod, she withdraws and slides two fingers inside, feeling Cat hot and wet around her, feeling Carly's fingers and the way they seem to tremble against her own as they both keep still, watching Cat, whose whole face and chest are flushed, whose mouth is parted, and who is letting out whimpers and moans of ecstasy. They're barely even *doing* anything, just *there*, and Cat seems nearly overwhelmed.

Sam smirks at Carly, who beams back at her, and they start to both gently pump and flex their fingers inside of their girlfriend.

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Sam and Carly are *both* inside of her. Their fingers are *inside* of her, slowly thrusting in unison, then alternating, pressing into her on opposite sides, and it's *a lot*. It's less the physicality of it, though at first she feels like she's *too tight* to accommodate them, until she remembers to breathe and takes a deep breath and feels herself relax and open. And then she *does* feel a bit of a stretching sensation, particularly with the way Sam's fingers move, that slowly fades into pleasure. But the real thrill is the knowledge that these two people she loves are inside of her, *together*, like the opposite of what had happened earlier when she was sandwiched between them but with the same emotional impact. Cat feels cared for, held, loved by these two who are making her their focus, making her pleasure their priority, working together joyfully, for *her*.

She can see it in their eyes, in the way they look at each other, that this is powerful for Sam and Carly, too, the almost feral way that Sam bares her teeth, the elation in Carly's wide smile, the way Sam leans over Cat's body to kiss Carly, briefly, before returning her attention to Cat, and she's half off the bed as she leaves love bites on Cat's breasts, her fingers still

working inside her. Carly is still stretched out next to her, kissing Cat again, while her hand works, her palm pressing and grinding against Cat's clit, and it's almost too much to bear. Cat's orgasm hits suddenly, and feels less like the culmination of pleasure and more like she's literally incapable of holding this much love and bliss and affection within herself and it has to come pouring out, spilling onto her partners, washing over them, and Cat tries to keep her head above water, feeling like she might drown as she repeatedly runs out of air crying out and moaning.

But Sam and Carly are both still there, Sam still half off the bed, perching next to Cat as well as she can, Carly pressed all along and against her. Cat can see the way they look at her, compassionate, careful, gentle as they hold her.

The crash starts to hit her, the fear and worry of *what have I done*, but Cat feels Carly's lips against her temple, hears Sam murmur how much she loves her and how sexy that was, and Cat decides immediately that she has nothing to feel bad about. This is *love*. It's love that is real, that is important, it's being shared and it's bringing the three of them even closer together. Cat had chosen this, Cat had *wanted* this, not just the sexual gratification, but as an expression of deeper feeling. She had craved feeling wanted and desired, she had embraced feeling out of control, because her partners felt the same way, and she *loved* being able to bring that out of them.

Cat has no shame, because she rejects it, because she refuses to regret any of this.

It feels too damn good to let her own fears and worries take that away from her.

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To be honest, Carly hadn't quite *expected* to jump into bed right away, just from the things Sam has told her, but she *really* isn't going to complain. Because the reality of Cat has been *so much more* intense and beautiful and *delicious* than the fantasy. Carly's risk had paid off. Not that it was that much of a risk, after she'd let Sam know what was happening, but it still feels big for Carly. She knows she can be a little risk-averse, and while the last big risk she took landed her in Italy for a year with her father, she has a feeling that this risk is going to lead to even more satisfaction and adventure.

Especially because she knows that even *this* encounter isn't even close to over yet.

She's holding Cat as she comes down from her orgasm, as she breathes and seems to just float in bliss a little longer, eyes unfocused, hair in disarray. Sam is on her other side, stroking her hair back gently, gazing at her, while Carly presses gentle kisses to Cat's shoulder and loops an arm around her, holding her tightly.

"You with us?" Sam teases, when Cat's eyes seem to finally focus on her.

"Mhmm," Cat hums, her placidly euphoric face slowly transforming into a broad grin. "Oh my god. I love you. I love you," she sighs out, kissing each of them in turn.

It's *way* too early for that kind of talk. Carly knows that rationally. She knows this is only the beginning, they're really still getting to know each other, and the kind of love like what she

and Sam share is something developed over time, something cultivated by experience, something borne out of the fights they've had that almost killed them, the distance they'd struggled with that almost made them give up hope, and most of all, the laughter they've shared over a decade of knowing one another, of sharing secrets and intimacy and growing ever closer, until they became each other's family, in the sense that Sam was always more at home in Carly's apartment, and Carly trusted Sam to protect her like she trusted no one else, even more than Spencer. And that's *before* they even created a different sort of family with Tori, and with Cat and Jade as supportive humans at their sides.

But Carly also feels the truth of Cat's statement. Maybe they haven't had the kind of history she and Sam share. Who else ever could, really? Those formative years only last so long. But Carly knows how long Cat has felt strongly about her, she knows that even she has been wrestling with feelings she wasn't ready to deal with for a while, herself. Cat can absolutely love her, and Carly can love her back, with full knowledge that this is just the seedling of love, still called by the same name even in its infancy, that will be grown and cultivated and cared for until it's strong and healthy and robust and its roots stretch deep and its branches grow high.

"I love you," Carly answers, nuzzling her face against Cat's neck as Sam echoes her sentiment, kissing Cat more fully. There's reassurance passing between them, as Cat and Sam process what *just happened*, which, Carly is doing that, too, but she also understands that these two might need a moment. Cat just had sex with *someone else* for the first time, and Sam is here now to be her guide and protector.

"That was so hot," Sam tells Cat, her voice soft, reverential. "You did amazing."

"I can't believe how *good* it felt," Cat murmurs, "With both of you." She looks over at Carly and kisses her, deeply and thoroughly. "You made me feel so..." She trails off.

Carly can imagine what she might be thinking. "You were *incredible*," she tells Cat. "The way you just *demand*ed what you wanted. And you looked so *gorgeous*. I'm so happy I got to be here for this."

Cat laughs softly, "If you weren't here, this wouldn't have happened." Her hand rests against Carly's face, and Carly kisses her palm. "I'm not normally so...demanding," Cat admits.

"Good thing it's hot when you are," Sam comments.

Maybe it's because of the new moon, when Carly tends to be a little more passive anyway, but she certainly hasn't minded ceding control to Cat during this encounter. Maybe it's just because she's a new partner, and Carly is also with Sam, who knows her well. Either way, Carly also knows from other experiences she's had that it's really *Sam* who brings out her more domineering energy. Maybe because they're both wolves, and there's some kind of ferocity that only seems possible with Sam. Maybe because Sam always obeys her. Maybe because it's just kind of *extra* hot to be in control of someone who she *knows* is stronger than she is, who she knows could absolutely take her in a fight, but who would *never*. Because despite her aggression and her short fuse, Carly has always known that Sam would *never* hurt her.

And maybe there's a little bit of that with Cat, in the sense of the realization that Carly *could* hurt Cat, but would never want to. Maybe that's why Cat brings out her more submissive side.

Either way, Carly isn't going to question it. There's always room to explore other angles later.

But now, Cat is turning to Sam, eyes glinting. "Carly hasn't come yet," she points out,

Sam blinks, and Carly can read in her expression that she's thinking *neither have I*, but Sam has shown in a dozen little ways during all of this that she knows this ultimately really isn't about her. Instead, she smirks. "We should change that."

Carly chuckles, abruptly feeling nervous when two sets of hungry eyes land on her. Moments later, Cat turns toward her, the lengths of their bodies pressing together, and kisses her, and the calm inside Carly as they all took a reprieve to allow Cat to recover from her orgasm quickly ignites once more.

They're kissing, and Carly feels Cat's hand on her breast, and lets her own hand drift to Cat's ass. Cat's leg presses between hers, but there's no leverage, no friction, and almost as one, Carly seeks to pull Cat on top of her at the same time that Cat tries to push her onto her back.

It doesn't quite work. There's a wall in the way. Laughing, Cat rolls away, and Carly manages to sit up, and tries to figure out how best to resituate herself on this too-small twin bed.

Cat looks to Sam, who is back at the foot of the bed. "I don't even know what you like," she addresses Carly.

"I like...all of it?" Carly answers. It feels honest, and easier than listing out a string of sexual acts.

"She really likes to get fucked," Sam tells Cat.

Cat shoots Sam a look that seems to say *well, obviously*, and turns back to Carly with a similarly disappointed expression.

"I think Sam means that I like...penetration," Carly says carefully, recalling the way Sam had talked about Cat's struggles with this very issue. Though she'd certainly enjoyed the penetration *she'd* just received, and Carly isn't exactly anticipating anyone whipping out a giant dildo right about now.

Besides, Sam is right, and Carly *really* wants Cat to touch her like that.

Cat looks thrilled by the very prospect, "*Ooh*," she trills musically.

"Here, let me show you," Sam offers.

Maybe she's sensing some hesitation in Cat that Carly didn't pick up on, because Cat looks delighted by the prospect. It occurs to Carly then, too, that not only is this Cat's first time with someone else in the sense of Carly helping to make her come, but it's Cat's first time with someone else in the context of *touching* someone else intimately, in making *them* come.

And maybe that would be extra-intimidating, especially with the eyes of the person who made your new lover come before anyone else did, who learned about sex right alongside your new lover, watching.

Sam coaxes Carly toward her. She's still sitting at the foot of the bed, one leg on the floor, and Carly crouches next to her, grinning, and kisses her. Sam kisses back with an eager grin, chuckling against Carly's lips, then asks, "You ready for this?"

"Stop asking stupid questions," Carly admonishes. She tries to figure out how to lie down in front of Sam, moving down toward the head of the bed to recline, but Sam stops her, and Carly can feel her hands urging her to turn around.

"So Cat can see," Sam murmurs. She's sitting behind Carly, legs open, and Carly finds herself reclining back against Sam's chest, head resting on her shoulder. It's a little awkward, Carly's slouching a bit, but she likes that she can turn her head and kiss Sam, and likes the feeling of Sam's arms wrapped around her.

And she *definitely* likes the feeling of Sam's hand gliding down her body, and the first press of her fingers between Carly's legs.

Carly gasps, hips shifting in reaction to Sam's hand, and she feels Sam's leg, the one that is on the bed, hook around Carly's own, to part her thighs wider. "Let's give Cat a show," she murmurs.

Heat floods her face, pools in her abdomen, and she absolutely feels like a specimen on display as Sam's fingers drift lower, as Sam's other hand rolls one of her nipples. She looks at Cat, who is watching the way Sam touches her, and who inhales audibly as Sam's fingers slip inside of her.

Carly lets her head tip back against Sam's shoulder, feeling the steady, shallow thrusts of her fingers, impeded by the angle of their bodies, by the show they're putting on for Cat, who watches with rapt attention. Carly is almost afraid it will be too much, to be watched like this, as Sam's expert fingers press and stroke and occasionally withdraw completely to swirl around her clit before sinking back inside. She feels *dirty*. But like, in a *sexy* way.

But Cat isn't about to let them have all the fun. "Let me try."

Sam withdraws her fingers, then turns Carly's face toward hers to kiss her, while Cat moves closer on the bed, kneeling in front of Carly, and Carly feels gentle fingertips stroking over her flesh, making her jolt slightly as they caress her clit. Sam withdraws from the kiss, her hands on Carly's breasts, just cupping them, letting Cat take the lead. Cat looks up at Carly and smiles, her eyes alight with joy and anticipation, then she glances back at Sam before her gaze falls between Carly's legs, and Carly watches the way she gently bites her lip just as her fingers sink inside.

Carly's eyes close as she focuses on the sensation, the way it feels for *Cat's* fingers to touch her like this, the careful way they move, the way her instinctual movements are different from Sam's, exciting to discover. Sam still holds her, her hands now moving over her breasts with more purpose, stroking her nipples, her teeth on Carly's shoulder, gently scraping. Carly

feels almost *helpless*, with the way Sam holds her, with the way she's just splayed open for Cat, accessible and vulnerable, as Cat begins to thrust in earnest.

She moans, feeling her pleasures begin to collide, the sturdiness of Sam, behind her, her protector, always, the curiosity of Cat, her desire to please, her need to give Carly what she wants. Hands, all over her. Skin, pressing against her. Sam's breath at her ear, her teeth at her neck, Cat's mouth taking over for one of Sam's hands, tongue flicking over Carly's nipple, lips pressing and sucking and caressing.

It's all so *delicious*, and Carly needs more. She lets her hand drift lower to her clit.

Sam's hand gets there first, finger swirling expertly over her flesh, and Carly understands that she is meant to do nothing but *hold on* and let them take care of her.

It's difficult to do that, though. Maybe because it's all so new, maybe because Sam's presentation of Carly still feels a little *intense*, as hot as it is. She's *close*, but it's just not quite enough, and she whines in frustration.

"Sam," Cat requests quietly, "Move your hand."

"Why?" Sam asks, and Carly feels the movement of Cat's fingers slow, and then they withdraw, but she looks down to realize that Cat is settling on her stomach in front of her. "*Oh*," Sam utters. "You sure?" she asks Cat.

"I want to," Cat says in a low voice.

Sam's other hand goes back to Carly's breasts, and Carly watches the way Cat looks on in *delight* as her fingers press back into Carly, but Carly's eyes close as Cat's mouth moves closer.

And then it's the sensation of her hot mouth, her lips and tongue coordinating a delicate dance over Carly's flesh, *a lot* like what Cat had been doing to her nipple moments before, but amplified, centered on Carly's clit. Her fingers push *just so* in a sharp thrust, and her lips pucker to suck gently, her tongue loops and swirls, and Sam tugs her nipples, and sensations collide, sharp staccato notes jangling into harmony, into a wave of a powerful frequency of pleasure that pushes a long, loud note from Carly's lungs as her hips lift and her head falls back and her spine feels like it undulates like a sound wave, in even dips and rises, in the same cadence as her walls squeezing Cat's fingers, as her breath, as Sam's joyful laughter in her ear.

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Carly coming is absolutely *stunning* to watch, like a force of nature, beautiful as a sunset splashing colors all over the horizon with the sheer power of a hailstorm, leaving Cat almost breathless in its wake. Though maybe that's also because her mouth is rather occupied, and the motion of Carly's hips pushes up against her nose. Either way, Cat's a little lightheaded when she finally lifts her mouth, and it doesn't diminish at all from her sense of wonder.



Even more than her own orgasm at the hands of both of her girlfriends, this feels *different*, this feels *new*. This feels like both an accomplishment and a new source of joy yet also a frightening departure from what is familiar, as images of Carly's height of pleasure slam through Cat's skull, reverberating with intensity.

This, more than before, makes her feel like a *slut*. To enjoy someone else's body *so thoroughly*, to want to do something *so intimate* so quickly, something it took so long to do with Sam.

Is it a *problem*, to be so desensitized to sex that Cat can want it so badly, so freely, that she's willing to just dive in?

But as Carly opens her eyes and looks at her with astonishment, smiles at her with a pure rapturous glory written all across her face, Cat finds...she doesn't *care* if she just did something wanton, or risky, or *whoreish*. Her connection with Carly is different, it's special, Sam is the bridge between them, Cat's invitation in.

And, there's love. She feels it acutely as Carly sits forward, finally released by Sam, and kisses Cat, gratitude and passion in every press of lips.

She remembers hearing about *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in English class. She doesn't really remember anything about the poems themselves anymore, but the duality of the terms strikes her in the moment, the idea of experience coming at the cost of innocence. Maybe Cat *isn't* as innocent as she once was. She certainly didn't treat oral sex so frivolously six months ago, but at the same time, Cat thinks that's *okay*. Her experiences allow her to enjoy more and *further* experiences, and innocence, and the sheltering and protection and withholding that it entails, is for children. Cat isn't a child anymore. She can *choose* experience, she can cultivate the life she wants, the pleasures she wishes to pursue, and it's nobody's business but hers and her partners'.

And God's, but Cat really doesn't think God has a problem with actions that produce love and joy.

After Carly pulls away, she slumps back against Sam, laughing softly. "Well," she murmurs, "I'm beat. And it looks like Cat is, too." She pats Sam's thigh. "Guess you'll have to take care of yourself."

Cat opens her mouth to protest, but closes it as soon as she sees the teasing glimmer in Carly's eyes.

Sam frowns, but she doesn't seem prepared to argue as she mumbles. "Guess I could. You two want to watch?"

"Nah, I've seen it before," Carly says dismissively.

Sam looks a little sour at this, and Cat worries they've gone too far in teasing her. "We're going to get you off, too, Sam!"

Carly laughs, turning in Sam's arms to kiss her. "*Obviously*," she teases.

“I knew that,” Sam replies with a slight smile.

“What do you want to do?” Cat asks her.

Sam looks between them, smile growing wider as she clearly considers the possibilities. “I think you just asked her a very dangerous question,” Carly drawls.

“Hold on, I’m thinking,” Sam tells them. “So much to choose from.”

“Oh, come here,” Carly chuckles, pulling Sam to her and kissing her. Cat moves closer, kissing along Sam’s neck and jaw until Sam turns her head to kiss Cat, too. “She’s really been so patient,” Carly remarks to Cat.

“We should reward her,” Cat agrees.

Sam looks between them. “I’m starting to think I’m not going to get to choose what happens anymore,” she states.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Cat says earnestly, “You’ll like it.”

Sam smirks, “I never worried about *that*.”

They keep kissing Sam, and each other, mostly focusing their attention on Sam: on her breasts, her neck, on Carly’s teeth against her shoulder or Cat’s nails along her back, until Cat hears Carly murmur, “I want to watch Cat go down on you.”

Cat lifts her head to look at Carly. It’s almost as if she can see the gears turning; something about her expression lets Cat know immediately that Carly has some kind of *strategy*, or agenda, for how this sex is going to go down (or, well, how *Cat* is going to go down). Which Cat is mostly okay with, considering they’re focusing on Sam. She’s curious and *eager* to see how Sam is with someone else, like, beyond watching Sam hold Carly while Cat touched her. *That* was hot, but she knows it was ultimately for her benefit.

For all the time she spent being jealous of Sam and Carly having sex, she wants to see what it’s like with her own eyes. Maybe that’s why she pipes up with, “Maybe I want to see *you* go down on her.”

Carly gazes at Cat, an amused glint in her eyes. “Okay,” she agrees. She stretches out onto her back. “Come on,” she coaxes Sam.

“Yeah?” Sam asks, eyes dark with desire. Carly nods, and Cat watches with fervent curiosity as Sam crawls up Carly’s body to straddle her face.

“*Oh*,” Cat utters softly, watching the way Carly’s hands grasp Sam’s thighs, the way Sam leans against the wall above Cat’s bed, the way Carly looks up at her, her eyes beaming in an affectionate smile, and her chin tilts upward, and Sam exhales a heavy groan as her mouth makes contact.

Cat moves closer, trying to get as close to them as she can, but it’s difficult, with the size of the bed and the way they’re positioned, but she can touch Sam, her back, her breasts, her ass,

or Carly's breasts, and if she leans in, Sam might kiss her for a moment, but most of her focus is clearly on the sensation Carly is providing. So Cat does a lot of watching, seeing the concentration on Carly's face, taking in the way Sam must look, hair spilling over her shoulders. She watches as Carly withdraws with mischievous eyes whenever Sam starts to get close, making Sam hiss out her protests, but ultimately grin down at Carly, and settle her hips closer to her face.

It doesn't take long before Cat wants to be more than just a spectator. "Can I try it?" she asks.

Sam blinks blearily at her. "I mean, it's kind of my turn, babe."

"No, I meant, I want to do what Carly's doing."

Sam looks down at Carly, who lifts a hand to give a thumbs up. "Oh! Oh, yeah." She carefully climbs off of Carly's face, and Cat takes her place lying down. Carly retreats toward the foot of the bed, but Cat isn't thinking so much about that, because Sam is currently straddling her chest, and gazing down at her with eager delight. "You ready?" she asks.

"Yeah," Cat nods eagerly. She watches as Sam settles herself into position over her mouth.

It's a little...*overwhelming*, at first. Sam's legs shift one at a time, to either side of her head, and Cat already feels *enveloped* in an intense way before Sam's pelvis starts to lower toward her mouth. And then Sam pauses, not quite touching Cat, and Cat looks up into her eyes.

She looks gentle and adoring, pleased and proud. Cat takes in the way she leans against the wall behind her bed, the way it makes the muscles in her arms flex. She grabs onto Sam's thighs, the way she saw Carly do, and feels how strong they are under her palms, how firm. Then she tilts her head back to let her mouth connect with Sam's flesh.

Quickly, Cat sees how *intense* it is. The way she feels completely encased in Sam, encompassed by her, despite her obvious efforts not to crush Cat. The way she gets to *look* at Sam, at the way her breasts sway and her stomach flexes as her hips gently rock to meet Cat's mouth. She moans softly against Sam, making Sam look down at her in concern, but she smiles when she sees from Cat's expression that she's just *enjoying* this.

Cat is so focused on Sam that she nearly jumps in surprise when she feels Carly's gentle touch at her inner thigh, encouraging her to spread her legs. She inhales shakily in surprise, but obeys Carly's implicit suggestion, while continuing to provide stimulation for Sam, whose hips are rocking a bit harder now, whose breath is coming faster.

There's only a moment of warning, the brief sensation of hot breath, before Cat feels Carly's mouth between her legs, and she whimpers loudly in response.

The shock of it is enough to shatter her focus on Sam, who notices both the sound Cat makes and her pause in sensation and looks down worriedly, but then lowers one arm and looks over her shoulder. "*Oh*," she utters.

"Mmmhmm," Cat manages, muffled as it is between Sam's legs.

“Oh, fuck, that’s hot,” Sam murmurs. “Enjoy, she’s really good at it,” she tells Cat.

Cat glares in response, lowering her mouth, because she’s *literally* doing the same thing right now. But it’s Carly who speaks up. “Cat’s pretty damn good at it, too, so maybe think about that if you want her to finish you off,” she warns Sam.

“Oh my god, of *course* you’re amazing, too,” Sam reassures Cat.

“So I’m really good but she’s amazing?” Carly challenges.

“That’s not—I’m—you’re both *great*, I—”

“I’m just teasing,” Carly lilts.

“Oh thank god I’m so close I can barely think,” Sam gets out in a rush.

Cat giggles, but takes that as her cue to lift her chin again and let her tongue swirl over Sam’s clit. Both of Sam’s hands plant against the wall again, her eyes close, and her hips grind subtly against Cat’s mouth as she curses under her breath, clearly chasing her orgasm.

Cat closes her eyes, focusing on breathing through her nose as she feels Carly, too, resuming her own stimulation of Cat, and it’s *incredible*, but distracting, as she tries to focus on Sam, but then a particularly rapid tongue-flicking maneuver makes her buck her hips and moan uncontrollably, making Sam growl in frustration.

“Carls,” she says in a warning tone.

“What?” Carly asks in a guileless tone.

“I know what you’re doing.”

Cat tilts her head down to ask, “What’s she doing?”

“Trying to delay my orgasm by distracting you,” Sam accuses.

“I am not!” Carly insists, but Cat is inclined to believe Sam. She winks at Sam, and then lifts her mouth to pick up where she left off, but she also removes one hand from Sam’s thigh to reach for Carly.

Maybe it would help if Carly felt more connected to them.

Carly grabs her hand, and Cat squeezes her fingers, and lets that connection be the bulk of her reaction to the pleasure Carly gives her while she focuses on Sam, because as hot as this is, as good as Sam looks, she’s kind of ready to give her neck and jaw a break.

It works, and despite Carly doing several things that make Cat whimper and writhe, she stays focused and before too long Sam’s hips start grinding harder, faster, and she groans aloud. Cat can feel her thigh trembling beneath her hand, sees the way her elbows buckle as she leans more of her weight against the wall, watches the way she stares past Cat, blank and

unblinking, before another wave of orgasm overtakes her, forcing more sounds out of her mouth.

Eventually, though, Sam's groans take on a different quality, almost achey, as she shakily manages to swing her leg over Cat's head and kind of collapses against the wall. "Fuck," she utters softly.

But Cat can't even really ask her how it was, or reach to hold her, because now all she can really focus on is *Carly*, whose mouth moves even more fervently between her legs, who holds Cat's hand in a steady grasp. Cat releases an extended moan, realizing just how close she is.

"Fuck," Sam repeats, with a different tone now, as if she's just realized what's happening next to her. She shifts on the bed as best she can, reaching for Cat's breasts to add to the stimulation, and Cat looks over at her, her eyes almost golden blue in their warmth, her smile just as reassuring, looks down at Carly, whose eyes are closed in concentration, face placid with contentment, and feels overwhelmed by love and luck as her own eyes close and her head tips back and her second orgasm of the afternoon pours over her, like balmy waves of bliss, less earth-shattering, but more comforting, more tender, like being held in a hammock under the throbbing moon.

At least, that's what Cat thinks of as she comes down from her softer orgasm, to quickly find herself being held by her lovers, in the closest way possible in a bed this small. She's teary-eyed, but it's laughter that falls from her lips, the joy of possibility, and the sweet euphoria of what's already come.

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Sam is basically squished against the wall, with Cat held as close as possible, while Carly has one hip on the bed and really only her top half pressed against Cat's other side, as the three of them just breathe and hold one another, while Cat giggles. The room smells powerfully of sex, their skin sticks together, makeup is smudged and rubbed away, and everyone's hair is the very definition of Just Been Fucked. Like, literally.

"Wow," Carly finally says. "If I'd known what I was missing out on, I would've taken Cat up on her offer months ago."

Cat nuzzles at her chin. "I'm glad you told me today," she says softly. "Maybe it was better that we had to wait," she muses, "So that you and Sam could have your time together, and so we could figure out about jealousy."

A part of Sam wonders if Cat's mention of Carly and Sam having their time together is born out of wistfulness that she and Carly haven't had a chance to connect solo, without her. She knows that's important, and vows to let them have that as soon as they want. But for now, she's just happy to be here with them. "Sometimes it's better to let things build," she comments.

"I guess you'd know all about that," Carly teases.

“I think we all do,” Cat adds pensively.

“She’s got a point,” Sam answers.

“Yeah,” Carly agrees wistfully. The arm that’s slung around Cat’s waist reaches to squeeze Sam’s hip. Sam lifts her own hand to squeeze Carly’s arm in return. It feels like there’s more to say, more to talk about in the wake of a lot of really hot sex. In the wake of a *threesome*. Holy shit, Sam just had a *threesome* with the two women she’s in love with, and even if her role had been sidelined a little due to her partners’ enthusiasm for each other, she has no regrets and no disappointments.

But she has one other pressing thought. “I’m *starving*,” she groans.

“Typical,” Carly laughs.

“What else is new?” Cat adds, turning to kiss Sam to take the sting out of her pronouncement. She nudges Carly, who rolls off the edge of the bed and onto her feet. “I’ll put some water on the stove for pasta and then I’ve got to take a quick shower,” Cat reports.

“Oh, me, too,” Carly agrees, as she stands and stretches in the middle of the room, her lean muscles and long legs looking so elegant she leaves both Sam and Cat silent for a moment as they stare.

Sam finds her brain and tells Carly. “I should probably figure out if I have any clothes you can borrow. Other than those.” She points to the borrowed socks that Carly is still wearing. Actually, they’re all still wearing socks. Funny how she hadn’t really noticed.

Cat climbs to her feet and offers a quick kiss to both of them before she wraps herself in her candy robe and hurries to the front of the house to start boiling water. Sam pads over to her closet. “I’m sure I have a shirt that’ll fit you. I worry all my pants’ll be too short, though.”

“Don’t you have, like, sweatpants or pajama pants or something?” Carly suggests.

“Good point. Hang on.” She digs through some shirts and pulls out an old striped shirt she hasn’t worn in a while. “Here.”

“This is clean, right?” Carly asks warily as she catches it.

“You really think I’d give you a dirty shirt? Don’t answer that,” Sam adds quickly.

“Aww, I remember this shirt,” Carly croons. “This was from that phase junior year where you decided you didn’t hate stripes.”

“I’ve always hated stripes,” Sam refutes. “Just on other people.”

“Ah,” Carly says, “So, you’re just planning to hate looking at me for the rest of the night?”

Sam turns to smile at her in mild exasperation. “No. Because you’re wearing *my* stripes. That makes it hot.”

"I see your Sam logic now," Carly replies.

"Water's on!" Cat sings as she glides back into the room, hanging back up her candy robe and stepping into the bathroom. "Be right out!"

"Here." Sam digs out a pair of purple plaid pajama pants that she thinks might have a longer leg on them. Then she pauses. "Uh, you don't need to borrow underwear, do you?"

"You know, I can't decide if that's weird or not," Carly says lightly. "It *really* shouldn't be, with everything we just did."

"Would boxers be less weird?" Sam suggests.

"Actually, yes," Carly agrees. Sam passes her a pair. "When did you stop wearing these regularly?" she asks.

"Probably around the time I thought that someday you might see me naked," Sam admits.

"Too bad," Carly laments. "I probably would have found it hot."

"Kinda funny to still be learning new things about each other after all this time."

Carly chuckles. "Guess there's still a lot more for all of us to learn about each other."

"Yeah. Like how much you like it when Cat orders you around," Sam smirks.

"I wouldn't say she *ordered* me around," Carly denies. "But, you know. Maybe it's the new moon or something but I *was* pretty into her being kinda...domineering." She looks thoughtful. "I don't know, it's kind of...*different* with a human, you know? With you, everything feels so *instinctual*, with her, it's like...everything is *discovery*."

"That's probably because it was your first time," Sam says bluntly.

"Obviously," Carly laughs. "But it's more than that. There's something so special about people so..." She searches for words, then settles on, "*unguarded*."

"I know exactly what you mean," Sam replies. It's a distinction she's considered many times; it's why Cat seems so delicate and physically fragile, but it's also why her emotions and desires seem so obvious, like she projects them from her face and body. Cat isn't someone who spends her life in hiding. It's very different to be with someone who doesn't feel like a reflection of yourself, who is a contrast, a harmonious counterpart. "She's tougher than she seems," she adds.

"No surprise there," Carly agrees.

"It's funny," Sam realizes, "That our first time was under the new moon, too. And now this."

Carly smiles. There's a touch of sadness to it. "I always want to make sure I'm being as honest as I can with my feelings."

“Huh. I always kinda feel like my feelings are more...*obvious* when I’m a wolf.”

Carly shakes her head. “No, I get it, I agree. I *know* how I feel when I’m a wolf. When I’m human?” She shrugs. “It just feels more complicated.”

“But you know how you feel now, right?”

“Absolutely.” Carly beams. “I mean...*so* much could have gone wrong today.”

“I knew they wouldn’t. I knew how Cat has been feeling,” Sam reassures her.

“Not just that. With the sex. Like. What if it turned out it was *way* too hard for us to see each other with someone else? What if you realized that sharing us wasn’t something you really wanted?” She seems to be getting agitated as she says. “We really moved too fast. We probably should have taken things slower.”

“But we *didn’t*,” Sam says. She reaches for Carly, grabs her shoulders to ground her. “And we’re *fine*.” She looks at her, at worried dark eyes. “You don’t really regret anything, do you?”

“God, no,” Carly scoffs. “Just...the biggest thing I’ve been worried about is messing all this up and losing *both* of you.”

“I’m not going to lose you again,” Sam vows. She smiles softly. “And when Cat loves, she loves *hard*.”

“I’m getting that,” Carly gives her a watery smile. “We should’ve talked about it more,” she says slowly, “but we can always talk more now.”

“Exactly,” Sam agrees. Though privately, she really doesn’t know what more there is to talk about. They’re all in love. It seems pretty straightforward to her.

Carly smiles at her. “Even if it was, I guess, unorthodox, I’m glad I got to share all of this with you.”

“*Me too*,” Sam stresses.

Cat comes flouncing out of the bathroom moments later. She sees the two of them and stops. “Everything okay?” she asks.

“*Very*,” Carly stresses. “I’ll take my turn at the shower?”

“Oh, you could use the guest shower,” Cat suggests, “Then Sam could shower, too.”

“Freddie used the last of the soap in the other bathroom, remember?” Sam tells her.

“Oh, that’s right,” Cat says, somewhat distractedly as she redresses in pajamas. “Well, we have plenty of soap! With no hair!”

“That sounds like how soap should be,” Carly replies as she heads into the bathroom herself.



Sam throws on Cat's candy robe so she can follow Cat back out front to the kitchen. "Is she really okay?" Cat asks her.

"She is," Sam tells her. "But also, I don't need to be your go-between anymore. She's your girlfriend, too." She notices a plate of cookies on the counter that hadn't been there earlier and idly picks one up.

"I know," Cat grins broadly, but then looks disapprovingly at Sam's cookie and puts the plate of cookies over by the coffee pot which, Sam processes, is full and on. "I just also know that we're still figuring out what that's going to look like for us. She already trusts you."

"That's fair." Sam leans against the counter and watches as Cat adds noodles to her boiling water. "How are you feeling?" she asks.

Cat's expression takes on a dreamy quality and her movements actually slow, as if she's reliving some things in her mind. "Oh, I'm *amazing*," she says quietly. "Do you know how long I've *wanted* this?"

"I have some idea." She smiles affectionately, but her expression turns a little more serious. "I guess I almost worried that we were moving too fast for you. That you would worry about, I don't know. The sex stuff."

Cat nods. Her dark eyes are thoughtful as she replies, "I worried about that, too," she admits. "There were even a few times during everything when I thought—when I was scared I might regret it. But I don't."

"That's great," Sam encourages.

"I guess it comes down to things feeling really simple. I want to seek out and experience things that make me feel loved and that let me express my love. All those rules that I grew up with, my parents and the people at my church taught them to me to protect me, because I was still young then. I don't think they knew how long I would carry it with me. And I don't think they even had the first thought about how little what they told me even *mattered* if I was going to be with a woman, or *women*." She shakes her head. "I'm trying not to let it bother me anymore. When I'm doing these things, with you and Carly, I don't feel ashamed. So why should I feel it later? It doesn't make sense."

"I agree," Sam supplies.

Cat meets her eyes and smiles at her. "I know that doesn't mean that all the things I've struggled and worried about are just *gone* but it feels like I'm starting to learn how to leave it behind me. When I have more experiences that make me feel good and deepen my connection with you and Carly, there's *good* that comes from what we do together. And things that are good and that make more love," she shrugs, "should be allowed. That's my opinion."

"I'm really proud of you, you know that?"

Cat smiles widely. "I'm really glad you were with me. You make me feel safe."

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“But I also can’t wait until I get Carly alone.”

“I know exactly what that feels like.”

Cat eyes her skeptically, “You’re going to take a shower, too, right?”

“I know better than to argue with you about that.”

After showers and food comes more kissing and cuddling, lazy sex, that even if Cat and Carly are mostly focused on each other, Sam is always there for. It seems obvious that Carly is going to spend the night, it’s something that’s barely discussed, but idly Sam wonders how they’re going to accomplish this with two twin beds and three of them.

It also wouldn’t feel exactly fair to her if Cat and Carly get to share a bed tonight when she and Carly have only shared the couch at Tori’s house since getting back together. Which had been great, but also, isn’t quite the same thing.

But Cat has an obvious solution, and when it’s time to get some sleep, they create a nest of pillows and blankets on the floor of the bedroom. Carly takes the spot in the middle, where she can cuddle with either or both Sam and Cat. Sleeping on the floor isn’t ideal, but at least for one night, it’s manageable.

The next night Tori is having a party, for no real occasion except that her parents are out of town and because it’s summer. In the afternoon, Carly leaves to go back to her apartment to shower and change into her actual clothes, but Sam and Cat aren’t far behind as they also shower and change and meet up at Carly’s apartment. It’s Sam’s turn to be the designated driver, for the three of them and Freddie. As they hang out at Carly’s, Sam says, “So, we’re going to tell everyone, right?”

“Why wouldn’t we?” Carly asks.

Sam shrugs. “Just asking. I think people will end up pretty confused if we don’t, with the way you two have been all over each other.” She gestures to them. Cat has been helping Carly choose an outfit to wear tonight and they’ve been doing each other’s hair and makeup (even though Sam thought that Cat had left the apartment already looking stunning, they’re evidently having fun with it).

“That’s why we should tell,” Cat says reasonably.

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. “Okay, so we’re on the same page.”

“Should we tell Freddie first?” Carly suggests, sounding uncertain.

“Why?” Sam asks harshly, her knee-jerk rejection of Freddie rearing up.

“Because we’re picking him up,” Carly explains, “and maybe the car ride would be weird if we don’t?”

“But maybe it would also be weird if we *did* tell,” Cat suggests.

“Which is worse?” Sam muses, “Being stuck in the car with three women who fuck each other and have no interest in you, or finding out *after the fact* that you were in the car with three women who were thinking about the great sex they had, while you babbled on about dumb nerd stuff no one cares about?”

“Sam,” chide Carly and Cat in unison.

“Am I wrong?” she challenges.

“Probably not entirely,” Carly admits.

“I know *I’ll* be thinking about it,” Cat says slyly.

Carly shivers. “You have no idea what a turn on that is,” she tells Cat.

As much as Sam certainly doesn’t mind when the two of them get a little handsy, especially since she’s acutely aware that they haven’t had a chance to have sex alone together yet, she tries to keep them focused. “So, are we telling Freddie or not?”

Carly blinks and seems to have to take a step away from Cat to focus on the conversation. “I think it might be more fair to tell him first. He is one of our best friends.”

“I guess,” Sam says begrudgingly.

“He might be hurt to realize we had a chance to tell him and didn’t,” Cat adds.

Then it’s decided. They’re telling Freddie first.

It actually goes much better than Sam expects. They drive over to the apartment he’s sharing with Spencer and when he comes outside, he reaches for the door to the backseat, then pauses, and opens the door to the front seat. “Wow, I guess I get shotgun?” he comments as he slides in.

“Eh, they wanted to sit next to each other.” Sam nods back toward Cat and Carly, who both giggle a little.

“Right,” Freddie responds, a little wary, like maybe he already suspects there’s a joke he’s missing. “So, should be fun tonight,” he adds gamely.

“They’re dating too now,” Sam blurts out.

“Excuse me?”

“Cat and Carls.” Again, she nods toward the backseat.

“We are!” Cat chirps.

“It just happened,” Carly elaborates.

Freddie turns in his seat a little bit, then faces forward again. “Huh. That makes sense,” he comments.

“I guess it does,” Sam agrees.

And that’s...that. Carly asks Freddie how it’s going living with Spencer, Freddie ends up talking about the boring video game thing he watched with Robbie (which, Sam looks in her rearview mirror and manages to catch both Cat and Carly’s eyes, and they have to stifle giggles when it becomes clear that Sam’s prediction came true). And before long, they’re at Tori’s house.

They’re the first to arrive, and Tori greets them all with hugs. Sam makes a beeline for the food, but Tori’s still setting it up, so she hangs back with Jade. She wonders if she should tell Tori and Jade now, but before she sees an opportunity, Trina comes down the stairs.

Trina sneers a little bit when she sees Sam, Carly, and Cat, and looks like she’s about to make some kind of comment about Tori having friends over, when she spots Freddie, and her eyes light up a bit. “Well, hey! Frankie’s back in town!”

Freddie glances over his shoulder, then gets it. “Um. My name is Freddie.”

“Whatever, how’s it going? Still in your program at your college?”

“Uh, yeah?” Freddie answers. “I got my grades last week, I did great.”

“Well, will you look at that. Cute *and* smart!”

“Trina,” Tori says warningly. “I told you if you’re going to be here, you can’t harass my friends!” She gives a paining smile to everyone else. “Sorry. Trina’s plans fell through, and obviously she can’t figure out anywhere else to go tonight.”

“For your *information*, I’m too devastated to go out since Cameron had to postpone our date because his grandmother is having bunion surgery!” Trina retorts snidely.

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s why,” Tori says under her breath. “Freddie, just tell her to go away if she’s bothering you.”

“Um, I’m fine—so far,” Freddie manages, tripping over his words slightly because as soon as he indicates that he’s okay, Trina moves unnaturally quickly and loops her arm with his.

“See? He’s fine.” Trina literally turns fully away from Freddie to stick her tongue out at Tori, then turns back to him with all smiles.

Jade looks *supremely* pleased by this whole scenario. “He sure looks fine,” she comments.

Tori shoots Jade a withering look, then sighs. “Whatever. Trina, you can stay, just don’t...be obnoxious. And if I tell you to leave, you *have* to leave.”

“Like I’d do what you tell me,” Trina scoffs. Tori raises her eyebrows, and the two of them stare at each other. Sam can feel the hair on the back of her neck rise as the standoff plays

out. After a few moments, Trina's gaze drops. "Hey, we're all here to have fun," she says. Her tone is sharp, but there's a *definite* note of defeat in her voice.

"Anyone else's nipples hard after watching that?" Sam murmurs to Carly and Jade, who are closest to her; she knows Freddie can't hear because of Trina's loud voice across the room telling him about the TV shows she's been acting on, but Tori clearly hears, because she presses her lips together, unamused.

"I already told you, I'm not discussing my tits with you, Sam," Jade answers in a bored tone, but from the goosebumps on her arms and the ferocious delight in her eyes as she looks at Tori, Sam is pretty sure Jade knows what she's talking about.

Carly merely bumps her with her elbow and says, "No comment."

It seems weird to make any kind of announcement with Tori's sister hanging on Freddie's arm. Maybe that's why Cat and Carly put some distance between themselves; Cat has wandered over to the kitchen to see if Tori needs help putting out any food or drinks, while Carly asks Jade about the footage she and Freddie shot of the short film earlier in the week. Christ, was that just *this week*? It feels like *ages* ago. Maybe because it's so many orgasms ago. Time definitely seems to stop when those happen.

Trina doesn't leave and no time feels quite appropriate before the guys arrive, which just makes it feel like so much more of a big announcement now. People get drinks, Tori serves food, and a mellow party atmosphere is starting to develop. Sam can see that Carly and Cat both keep looking at her from where they are in the room, still keeping their distance from one another. They're looking at her *expectantly*. Oh, shit, are they expecting *her* to make this announcement for them?

Maybe it makes some sense. She's their connecting point. Finally, Sam clears her throat as loudly as she can. "Um. Guys?" The sound in the room starts to die down, with Trina being the last to stop talking and looking at Sam in annoyance. "Thanks. So, I have an announcement."

"Oh, this ought to be good," she hears Jade mumble behind her.

"Well as you all know, Cat and Carly are both my girlfriends," she starts. Trina makes some kind of choking inhaling sound. Yeah, okay, maybe Trina didn't know that, but whatever. "And, something has changed."

But Cat is clearly too excited, because she cries out, "Carly and I are dating, too!" and skips across the room to grab onto her new girlfriend and kiss her in front of everyone.

Sam smiles. She's still getting used to the pang of jealousy she feels when she realizes she's not the one they're both currently obsessed with, but having been on the other side of that, she understands, rationally, that it doesn't make her less important.

"Wow," Jade deadpans. "I am absolutely shocked."

"Oh my gosh, congratulations!" Tori exclaims.

“So y’all are a triad now?” Andre asks. When Sam nods, he nods back. “Cool,” he says simply.

Beck just nods quietly, Trina looks slightly horrified at the kissing that’s happening in front of her, and Robbie claps his hands. “Cat! You got a *new* girlfriend and you didn’t *tell* me?!”

“It just happened!” Cat defends herself. “I’ll tell you all about it. Minus some, um, *personal* details.” She winks at Carly and Sam.

“Ohh,” Tori trills with interest, which earns her an elbow in the side from Jade.

“Who wants to smoke this?” Andre shifts the topic somewhere else entirely as he holds up a canister of weed.

The group files outside, even Trina, who is still hanging on Freddie. While Andre grinds the weed and packs the bowl, they’re all just mingling; Sam can hear Robbie asking Cat about when she realized she had feelings for Carly, can hear the way Cat obscures a few details but gives a basically honest account of her feelings, while Carly stands nearby and grins, looking a bit embarrassed at the way Cat talks about liking her for so long.

Tori approaches Sam, who has been standing in comfortable silence with Jade. “They look happy,” she comments, nodding at Cat and Carly.

“They are.” Sam smiles reflexively. Their happiness *does* make her happy, after all.

“Is it weird?” Tori asks.

“Which part?”

“I don’t know,” Tori muses. “It seems like you guys had just started getting used to the whole thing where they both dated you, but this adds a whole other element to things. I don’t think I even thought about it until I saw them together.”

“It’s different,” Sam acknowledges, but that’s about all she has time to say before Andre asks who wants greens on the bowl.

Carly starts the circle by taking the first hit; Sam joins the circle as a social participant, like Robbie, who is the driver for the guys today.

“Trina, have you ever even smoked before?” Tori asks her sister, sounding mildly concerned.

Trina scoffs. “Please, I was smoking weed while you were in diapers!”

“I *really* hope not,” Tori replies, heavily skeptical.

“So then,” Robbie cuts in, “What’s the plan with you three?” He gestures to Sam, Cat, and Carly. “Are you going to move in together?”

Sam glances over at her girlfriends, who both look a little surprised by the question. “I don’t know,” Cat answers.

“We haven’t talked about it yet,” Sam adds.

Robbie nods. “Right, gotcha. So then...are you going to have to, like, schedule dates? To make sure you all have time for each other?”

“Maybe,” Carly suggests, glancing at the other two. “It does make sense.”

“We just haven’t really nailed it down yet,” Sam explains.

“Seems like it’s going to take a lot of planning,” Beck comments, frowning a little.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Sam replies, in a tone she hopes indicates she’d rather not keep talking about it. “This *is* pretty new still,” she reminds everyone. She hopes that someone like Tori or Jade might jump in with a new topic *aaaany* second now.

Surprisingly, she has Trina to be grateful for, because she sighs exaggeratedly and says, “Can we talk about *literally* anything else?”

Gamely, Andre takes the reins. “So, Jade. Have you started working on the movie you want to shoot next this summer?”

“You’re shooting a movie?” Trina asks with great interest.

It’s Jade’s turn to look sour. “I’ve already cast it,” she tells Trina sharply.

Trina rolls her eyes and grumbles, “Jeez, I was just asking,” as Jade continues to talk about how she’s chosen the script she wants to start with and is laying out her prospective call sheets for each day. But Sam is kind of thinking about the questions Robbie asked them.

*Should* they move in together? It’s the kind of question that she knows is a big deal in other relationships that just never was in any of hers, until now. She and Carly had been far too young to really consider the prospect when they dated in high school, except to talk idly about their futures, and how Sam would follow Carly to whatever college she wanted to attend and get an apartment with her and find some kind of hustle to support herself. And she and Cat had basically started living together when they met, so it was never even something to discuss.

Adding Carly to their living situation *sounds* great, but Sam wonders how it will impact the relationships they all share. Is it better for Carly to have a bit of distance, so that spending time with her feels more precious? Maybe Carly would prefer more privacy than living with roommates would allow; she spent her entire childhood with basically a whole floor of her apartment to herself. Also, Sam has figured out how to live with Cat in a way that minimizes friction, but she’s managed to annoy Carly just by staying at her apartment when they were younger. Sure, she’s older now, and slightly more responsible, but she also knows, has *long* known, that no one else can annoy Carly like she does.

Is it even a good idea to merge this way? Will they even be able to find something affordable if they move out of Nona’s old apartment?

But then, if they *don't*, Cat doesn't drive, so if she wants to spend time with Carly it would either involve not-so-reliable public transportation or a lot of driving on Sam or Carly's part. And she and Carly *do* miss each other *a lot* when they're not together. It feels like it'd be really nice to be closer.

Though right now, this is all just Sam's musings, because *they haven't talked about* any of it.

The pipe gets repacked and passed around the circle a couple of times, and then the group heads back inside. Sam decides to raid the snacks in the kitchen before the munchies set in with everyone else, which she knows will happen soon. For now, though, Carly and Cat are still kind of focused on each other, and Sam can hear Tori congratulating them. Meanwhile, Freddie seems to be trying to shake Trina, and starts talking to Robbie about their shared interest in that weird nerdy video game. She watches that for a moment, because it's amusing to actually be able to *see* Trina lose her attraction to Freddie, something she wants to save in her mind to make fun of him at a later date.

Beck is nearby, looking a little pained and bored with Robbie and Freddie's conversation himself, and Trina drifts over to him. "So. Are you still gay?" she asks him.

He frowns. "Yes?" he replies, sounding a little offended.

She sighs. "Whatever." Sam can almost see the gears turning in Trina's head as she looks around the room that is *full* of queer women and men, nerds and...Andre. She approaches him. "Hey."

"Uh, hi?" Andre looks supremely uncomfortable with Trina's attention, like he doesn't know whether he should run or try to fumble through the conversation.

"So..." Trina is obviously groping for something to talk about, and lands on, "What was that weed you had?"

"Oh, uh. Pressed Lemonberry," he answers reluctantly, but anything else he says to Trina, Sam doesn't notice, because Jade approaches her.

"Leaving some for the rest of us?" Jade snarks.

"Trying to," Sam replies. "Why did your girlfriend buy these tiny paper plates?"

"Probably for you," Jade admits. She's watching Sam with narrowed, red eyes and a slight smile.

"Uh, what?" Sam asks, when Jade's staring continues.

Jade shakes her head. "Sorry. I was thinking about having a whole conversation with you without actually having it. Andre's weed is *good*."

"Sounds like it," Sam chuckles.

"So this thing with Cat and Carly just happened, what, like yesterday or today?"



“Yesterday,” Sam clarifies.

“People sure have a lot of questions for something so new,” Jade remarks.

“Tell me about it. I wouldn’t be asking Tori’s sister and Freddie when they’re going to move in together if they started dating today. God forbid,” she adds, shuddering a little.

Jade squints toward the other side of the room. Or maybe that’s just what her eyes are doing right now because she’s high. “Kinda looks like she’s lost interest anyway.”

“Yeah, Freddie has a way of making himself *really* unattractive.”

Jade hums neutrally. “Maybe not to Robbie,” she cracks.

“Well, nerd charm works on other nerds, I guess.”

“So, not to talk more about the relationship that *just* happened, but how’s it going for you?” Jade asks. “Because I can imagine...*that* might be kind of weird.” She gestures toward where Cat is leaning against Carly affectionately as they chat with Tori.

Sam smiles, because the sight of them still does that to her, but she *is* a little jealous, too.

“You know, it’s great, and I’m happy for them. This was kind of what I thought would make sense all along, and I’m glad it’s going to cut down on their jealousy for each other.”

“But?” Jade prompts.

“I *do* feel a little left out,” Sam admits. “And I know it’s like, I know it’s temporary, that it’s new and exciting for the two of them and that they still love me, but it feels like *very* quickly they both went from being so focused on me to me being so sidelined.”

“I’m kind of getting that impression.”

“And I know it’s not a big deal and I know it won’t always be like this and I understand *completely* why they’re so into each other, like, more than anyone else possibly could, I imagine. But...yeah. I guess I’m kind of getting the idea of what it’s like now that jealousy is on the other foot.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Jade asks.

“Nothing, for now. It’s so new, I want to let them have this, but if it keeps going like this I’ll just ask them to give me some more attention or something, I don’t know.”

“Are you happy?” Jade asks abruptly.

Sam blinks. “Actually, yeah.” She laughs softly. “Just, like, *admitting* I’m jealous kinda helped. And also, maybe it doesn’t sound like it with all my complaining but like...I had the *hottest* threesome last night, like, you have *no* idea.”

“And I don’t *need* an idea,” Jade says firmly, but she smiles slightly. “Good for you, though, since that’s what you’re into.”

“But I guess it’s also just... all those questions about what we’re going to do in the future make me anxious. Because we haven’t even had a chance to talk about it but now I’m stuck wondering about whether we can all live together and if it’s going to be really fucking weird to drive Cat over to hang out with Carly alone, without me.”

“Unknowns are always scary in relationships,” Jade states plainly. “But they’re also part of what keeps relationships exciting.”

Sam considers this. “That’s true. I think.”

“Some unknowns you’ve got to talk about first, and some you can just play by ear. I dunno, you have two girlfriends, which I could *literally* never do, so I imagine you can figure out for yourself which kind of unknown is which.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. “Sorry you’ll never have two girlfriends, you’re missing out.”

“I can barely handle Tori, believe me, I’m fine. Besides, I’m not so sadistic as to subject myself to more than one person. Even I have limits.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sam rolls her eyes. Jade always talks a good game, but Sam can usually see through her bluster.

Besides, she’s kind of feeling better about things, a feeling that only grows once everyone else’s munchies kick in, and Cat and Carly both come over to the snack area and lavish affection on her for a while. Jade rolls her eyes at the three of them, but Sam can tell she’s happy for her.

Yeah. The perks to this *definitely* outweigh the jealousy.

# Fecundity—Luxury

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

This whole situation should feel new and intense, but it's...*fine*?

In a very short amount of time, Carly has gone from being public about having a girlfriend for the first time (with the added unusual detail that her girlfriend also still has the other girlfriend everyone else already knew about) to being public about having *two* girlfriends.

She'd spent a long time being worried about the consequences of people finding out that she is queer; she worried about Spencer becoming overly parental, about Freddie's feelings being hurt, about her father rejecting her, but now she's relieved to be in an environment and among friends who just *accept* this development for what it is. Even if Beck is clearly someone who is a bit skeptical and uncomfortable about the whole situation, Carly feels safe among these people.

Well. Except Trina. But Carly doesn't consider her part of this friend group and it's clear Tori knows how to handle her sister.

It's been *exciting* to be with Cat in a public way, being able to touch her and even kiss her (though they both try to keep it tasteful) in front of other people. The party is really beginning to hit its stride, with music playing, a lot of laughter, when Carly realizes she's hungry. In fact, she's *really* hungry. Oh yeah. They smoked weed not long ago. *That's* why she's hungry.

She sees Sam talking to Jade across the room in the kitchen, holding a root beer in one hand and a handful of chips in the other, and food leaves her mind completely.

"Look at Sam," she tells Cat.

Cat looks over and her face brightens noticeably. "Aww! She's so cute!"

"I know!" She's struck by the abrupt sensation of being flooded with love for Sam. Not a new feeling by any stretch, in fact, a constant feeling for the last several years of her life, but one that feels filled with renewed vigor as she takes in her girlfriend, her first lover. Sam is the reason for *all* of this, she's the one who *found* Cat, who helped the three of them all make a meaningful connection with each other. "I want to go kiss her," Carly comments.

"Not if I get there first!" Cat retorts cheekily.

Carly looks over to see a playful glint in Cat's eyes, and then the two of them hurry over to Sam's side, Cat nearly making Robbie spill his drink in the process.

Carly gets there first, but barely, and she collides with Sam in a way that makes her hold her root beer up protectively. She grabs onto Sam and holds her tight as Cat joins them, doing the same on her other side.

“What’s all this for?” Sam asks, sounding amused.

“We were hungry, and then we realized you looked more appealing,” Carly tells her, nuzzling her neck.

“We’ve got the munchies for *you*,” Cat exclaims, then collapses into giggles.

“Aaand, that’s my cue to leave,” Jade drawls, rolling her eyes, though she appears amused.

“Don’t be jealous,” Sam brags at her retreating back. Jade merely lifts a middle finger in response.

The three of them end up sitting on a couch all together while Freddie tries to talk to them about *iCarly*, but it’s supremely difficult to focus on what he’s saying. Still, Carly isn’t completely incoherent; she’s a little high and a little drunk, but most of her distraction is due to the proximity of Sam and Cat. She is paying enough attention to know that Freddie is pitching some good ideas, but even now, as she hears them and responds to them, she has a sense that by tomorrow, she’ll have forgotten most of it. But she lets him talk.

Before too long, though, Sam’s attention is taken by something else. “Whoa, whoa, hey. Wait. Tori, do you have that game?” She’s staring toward the TV.

“What game?” Tori asks.

“Jade, does she have that game?” Sam asks.

“What ga—*oh*!” Jade realizes. “You mean that hitting game?”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah, she does,” Jade drawls, sounding pleased.

“What hitting ga—*oh*!” Tori, too, realizes what Sam is talking about.

“What hitting game?” Carly can’t help but ask, because she’s totally lost, and the context concerns her.

Cat gasps. “Wait, you mean the game you and Jade bonded over when you first met?”

“Yeah!” Sam says excitedly. “We were supposed to have a rematch *so* long ago.”

“I forgot about it,” Jade says blithely.

“You ‘forgot’ because you *lost*,” Sam says smugly.

“I did not *lose*,” Jade scowls. “We hadn’t finished playing yet.”

“Well, then, let’s go,” Sam gestures toward her. “Tori, where are your hitters?”

“I think they’re in here somewhere.” Tori opens the cabinet doors of the TV stand and rummages around until she finds two implements that look like oversized plastic baseball

bats. “Here you g—”

Jade snatches one of the big bats immediately, and Sam leaps up to claim the other one. The controller to the gaming console (Carly can never keep them straight) slides into the handle and the bats light up.

And then Sam and Jade start swinging the bats like they’re beating an imaginary person to death in front of them.

It’s intense to watch. And it’s kinda *hot* to watch Sam go wild like this, albeit in a controlled way. She hears Freddie murmur, “I’d say I’d challenge the winner, but I don’t know if I *want* to.”

“I’ll play you,” Andre suggests. “If we even get a chance.”

As Sam plays, Carly starts to realize she never actually grabbed a snack while she was in the kitchen. “Oh, shit, I’m still hungry,” she comments to Cat, who moved closer on the couch after Sam got up.

Cat gasps, “Wait, me too!”

“Let’s get something to eat then.” It takes them some time to manage to get motivated, but they get up off the couch and go into the kitchen, where they watch the gameplay from a distance over some veggies and ranch dip.

“Hey.” Cat bumps her hip against Carly playfully.

“Hey, yourself,” Carly replies, smiling at her.

“You look really good tonight,” Cat purrs softly.

Just that alone is enough to shift Carly’s mood from pleasantly stoned and snacking to... kinda horny. “You’re looking pretty good yourself,” she tells Cat, eyes trailing down her body. Cat is wearing a sleeveless top and a skirt, looking summery and comfortable in an effortlessly sexy way.

“I bet I’d look better on top of you,” Cat murmurs quietly.

*Damn, Cat.* Carly is rendered a little bit speechless for a moment. Everything she thought she knew about Cat Valentine before they started dating has been challenged by the discovery of her as a confident sexual person. Yet another thing she has Sam to thank for, considering she knows how uncertain Cat had apparently felt about her sexuality for a long time.

“Sorry, was that too much?” Cat asks, concerned, when Carly is quiet for a stretch.

“Not at all,” Carly finds her voice. “Just surprising. In a good way.” She looks around. “I *love* being here with our friends, but I kind of wish you and I could have some time to ourselves, finally.”

Cat hums. "I was thinking the same thing." She smiles slyly. "You know, Sam and I once hooked up in the garage."

"Wait, really?" Carly asks. This is yet another surprising detail.

"Mmhmm," Cat hums. "And I bet if we're discreet, no one will even notice if we slip out."

Carly glances over Cat's shoulder to the door of the garage. It's so close, it seems so eminently possible to just...quietly vanish. She looks back at Cat and stifles a giggle. *Oh*, they're doing this. She follows right at Cat's heels as they walk, quickly but quietly, to the garage door, ease it open, and slip inside.

There are immediately stairs down into the garage, but Cat knows to expect them and holds out a hand to keep Carly from stepping too quickly and tripping down them. They pause at the door, listening for a moment to see if anyone is going to immediately follow them, before they move down the stairs as stealthily as possible until they're in the garage. It's dark, though that doesn't bother Carly, and it clearly doesn't bother Cat as she grabs Carly and pulls her close, leaning back against the wall, just far enough away from the stairs that no one will see them if they open the door.

Carly quickly and easily gets lost kissing Cat, and the sounds of the party upstairs fade into the background as she enjoys what is really her first private moment with her new girlfriend. It's sexy and *exciting*, and she loves that it feels like they're getting away with something. It reminds her, in some ways, of the times she and Sam would get away with having sex right under Spencer's nose, sometimes even right before they were about to meet Freddie. There were *so many* times they probably could have been caught, and never were.

But this time, Carly's focus is broken by the *very* loud voice of Tori's sister. It sounds like she's in the kitchen, so close to the garage door, and she's asking where Cat and Carly went.

"I don't know, the garage?" Tori suggests in response, sounding irritated.

"Why would they be in the garage?" Trina asks.

"Think about it," Jade drawls, "Why on *earth* would two people at a party slip away somewhere they can be alone."

"*Eww*," Trina hisses, "They're having sex in our *garage*?!"

Shockingly, she doesn't scream it, so Carly thinks it's possible the *entire* party doesn't hear it, but she sure does. Cat has realized that Carly isn't kissing her back anymore and whispers, "What?"

"Trina knows we're down here and doesn't sound happy about it," Carly reports.

"Oh!" Cat says, voice excited and urgent. "We'd better go somewhere else."

"Yeah, but *where*?" Carly asks. She's not about to try to go upstairs to Tori's bedroom, that would be rude, and she's never setting foot in Trina's bedroom again if she can help it.

“Come on,” Cat says quietly, taking Carly by the hand and guiding her to the door out of the garage—the human-sized door, not the rolling car-sized garage door. “We’ll go to the car.” She unlocks the door and Carly follows.

“But isn’t it locked?” Carly wonders. They’re standing in front of the old boxy car that Sam drives. Carly tries the door, and it’s definitely locked.

But Cat holds up a set of keys with a devilish grin.

“Where did you get those?” Carly asks in awe.

“Sam always has me hold her keys and stuff in my purse,” Cat answers.

“Yeah, but your purse is upstairs...”

Cat shrugs enigmatically. “I just thought there was a chance I might need them,” she replies with a cheeky grin.

Carly finds her own grin slowly transforming her face. “Oh, you totally planned this,” she realizes.

“Maybe I did,” Cat answers coyly, and slips the key into the car door and turns it twice to unlock all the doors.

Carly follows her into the backseat, eager and *kind of* marveling at the situation they’re in.

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For all that Sam complains about Nona’s car, Cat thinks she isn’t giving one perk enough credit: the large back seat. In part because she and Sam only ever had sex in the back seat of this car once, just to cross it off their bucket list. It simply hasn’t been necessary to do it again, when they live alone and can have sex anywhere in their apartment that they want.

But right now, with Carly, is the perfect opportunity for more exploration as to just what is possible in this setting.

They climb inside together, giggly and a little uncoordinated, until they’re sitting next to each other and can just *kiss*, feeling like they finally have privacy, the safety of a car in the driveway, away from the other partygoers.

Carly’s hands are warm, and wander over Cat’s body, though she’s mostly focused on Cat’s breasts. Cat grins against her mouth, pushing closer. Her own hands have until now mostly been focused on wrapping around Carly’s body, drawing her closer, but Cat quickly decides that there are easier and better ways to get closer to Carly.

She swings her leg over Carly’s lap and settles against her, hands over her shoulders, balancing against the back seat.

Carly looks up at her, eyes full of wonder and arousal. Cat sinks down onto her lap, bringing them face to face, and kisses Carly again, and this time, Cat’s hands can easily wander, too,

over Carly's breasts that are now *conveniently* right in front of her.

But she's also aware that they're here for a reason. At least, she is. And she makes her intentions clear with the way she grinds against Carly's lap. It's not like there's really much to grind *against*, with the way they're situated, but the motion sends a message, and when Carly's hands grasp her hips, encouraging those movements, Cat whimpers softly.

"You drive me crazy," Carly whispers to her, hands tightening on Cat's hips.

"Good, because you've been driving me crazy all day," Cat answers, between kisses. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about this."

"About...kissing in this car?" Carly asks, in a mildly facetious tone that suggests she *knows* what Cat has been thinking about, she just needs Cat to *say* it.

So Cat does her best to spell it out without being *too* vulgar. She kisses her way toward Carly's ear and murmurs, "About doing *more* with you. Alone."

Carly places a hand on Cat's collarbone, gently, just enough to urge Cat to put a little bit of space between them so that Carly can look at her face. "Is this really what you want our first time to be?" she asks seriously.

Cat appreciates the courtesy and care in Carly's question, but she's already thought about this. She already *had* what she considers a "perfect" first time, with Sam: one that was based in love, one that happened in her bedroom, where she felt safe, one that was sensitive to her anxiety and sexual shame. Sam had been so *loving* and sweet and it was a *very* beautiful and sexy memory to look back on, but Cat isn't the same person now as she was then. Her experiences have shaped her, she's learned about herself, and her capacity to love and enjoy sex with multiple people. Back then, she had been positive that she would never have sex with anyone else but Sam for the rest of her life. Now, she knows that as long as Sam is okay with it, she can have sex with someone else that she's in love with. And while she's not necessarily anticipating adding anyone else to her sex life other than Carly, she also knows she won't have a crisis if an organic situation arises that she and Sam and Carly can discuss and potentially engage in, together.

And, really, even this sex with Carly is a technicality: they've *had* sex before, just last night. The only difference is that it was a threesome with Sam, and now they're alone. So while, yes, there *is* something special and significant about their first time *alone* together, it doesn't carry the same weight for Cat as her first time with Sam. Nothing *ever* will, she doesn't think. And that means her first time with Carly doesn't have to try to match her first time with Sam. Cat wants to create a different kind of first time with Carly. One that's less about the milestone and more about the adventure they're embarking on together. So in a new location, just out of the way of other people, in a state of heightened sensation and arousal...is just about perfect.

But rather than lay it all out that way, Cat just kisses Carly and tells her, "This is going to be perfect. Because it's with you."



That's evidently all the convincing Carly needs, because she's back to grabbing Cat and kissing her fervently. Cat slips a hand up Carly's shirt; she's wearing a loose, silky short-sleeved blouse that has been drawing Cat's eye all evening. She can feel the way Carly pushes even closer to her as her fingers dip beneath her bra and clumsily roll her nipple. Carly curses breathily, and her hands slip beneath Cat's skirt to grab her ass, making a shiver run down Cat's spine.

After this, things become more urgent. It's unspoken, but it's as if they both realize at the same time that just because they're tucked out of the way doesn't mean they can't or won't be interrupted. Cat reaches for Carly's jeans and works the button as quickly as she can, while Carly shifts on the seat, trying to open her legs wider. Cat lifts her knee and repositions herself so that she's only straddling one of Carly's legs, giving them both a little more room to work with.

"Touch me," Carly breathes, almost *begs*.

Cat smiles wickedly. It feels so exhilarating to have someone that embodies so much that is savage and powerful and mystical be so completely under her sway. Somehow, she *knows* that even if she were to deny Carly pleasure, just to play with her, that Carly would accept it, that Carly would let her make such choices, be in charge.

But Cat has no intention of making Carly suffer right about now.

"I want you so badly," she whimpers, and then her hand slips down Carly's body and inside her jeans and panties, and Cat moans when she encounters wetness.

Carly hisses out her pleasure, and tugs Cat closer to kiss her again, as Cat focuses on her fingers, trying to orient her touch. There isn't much room to maneuver between the tight fabric and Carly's slick flesh, and Cat presses and swirls her fingers at random, until Carly has to help her, both verbally and with her hand, over her jeans, helping to guide her. When Cat finally makes contact with Carly's clit, she watches the way her eyes close and her mouth parts in a soft groan.

Cat works her fingers, knuckles pressing hard against the fabric of Carly's clothes, and she's not very focused on her own body, such that she barely notices when Carly's hand stops holding onto her waist until she feels fingers at her inner thigh. "Sam was right," Carly comments in a husky voice. "This *is* convenient."

And then Cat barely has time for more than a brief chuckle before she feels fingers move her panties aside and slide against her, eliciting an involuntary moan. She closes her eyes and rests her head on the seat, just above Carly's shoulder, as she tries to maintain her focus on touching Carly, trying to shut out distractions. "I wish I could get inside you," she whines in frustration, as the angle of her wrist and the restriction of Carly's jeans prevents her from being able to accommodate fingering.

"Do you want me inside of you?" Carly asks, her voice still that low and sexy purr that makes Cat's knees weak.

Cat moans out her affirmative, and then feels Carly slip inside her easily, and it's somehow both frustrating to be denied it on her end, and *so* satisfying, just the simple sensation of penetration, in a setting where it feels transgressive and dangerous and almost impossible.

The excitement and emotion almost overwhelm her, and then Carly starts moving her finger, and just like that, it's barely ten seconds before Cat starts coming.

It's abrupt and overwhelming, a sudden release for all the eagerness that has been building all night. She clutches at Carly, head tipping to press her face against her shoulder instead, as her hips jolt and she shakes on top of Carly, groaning incoherently.

Finally, she lifts her head, and with her free hand gropes for Carly's wrist to communicate that she doesn't think she can handle any more sensation, then grips the seat again to keep her balance. Carly withdraws her fingers, looking smug, and runs her finger along her lips and tongue, then sucks it clean, while Cat watches, still somewhat stupefied.

"You were supposed to come first," Cat tells her, almost accusatory.

"Sorry," Carly smirks, not sounding it in the least.

Cat begins to regain her ability to concentrate and starts moving her fingers again, the ones that have been inside Carly's pants this whole time, and hears the way Carly's breath catches. "What do you need?" Cat asks.

"I'm not sure," Carly answers. "I think I'm pretty close."

So Cat makes the decision. She pushes Carly's blouse up as her fingers keep working, and pulls down one cup of her bra as best she can so she can press her mouth against Carly's nipple. She can hear the eager sound Carly makes as her tongue flicks over her flesh, as her fingers keep swirling, slipping, stroking, hand tingling, little finger almost numb. And when Cat's teeth press delicately against Carly's nipple, she breaks, nearly bucking Cat off her lap in the process. Cat feels the pressure of her wrist against denim, her feeble attempts to keep sensation going, as she mostly just grabs the back of the seat and holds on while Carly shudders beneath her.

"Oh god," Carly pants out. "That was..."

She doesn't finish the sentence. But she doesn't need to. Cat's head is swimming with the satisfaction of the sex they just had, pleasantly buzzing with the substances she's consumed tonight. She withdraws her hand delicately from Carly's pants and does her best to lick her fingers clean, if for no other reason than because there isn't a better option. The way Carly watches, though, is a perk.

Carly wraps her arms around Cat and she rests her head on Carly's shoulder and they both bask in each other and breathe, letting the experience crystalize between them.

Cat has no regrets whatsoever. "How was that for a first time?" she asks Carly. It's not a serious question, because she knows they both enjoyed it, but she is curious what Carly might have to say.

“Incredible,” is Carly’s assessment. “But next time we’re doing it somewhere where I can take off my pants.”

“Or *you* could wear a skirt,” Cat suggests coyly.

Carly hums thoughtfully. “I could! I used to wear them more often. I guess maybe I fell out of practice because Italian guys can get kinda handsy.”

Cat frowns. “Gross.” But then she brightens. “How do you feel about Italian girls getting handsy?”

“*That*,” Carly pulls her in for a kiss, then finishes in a seductive tone, “I am always in favor of.”

They kiss, slow, savory kisses, comfortable and warm. Finally, Cat asks, “Do you think anyone has realized we’re gone?”

“We *know* people have realized we’re gone,” Carly answers. “The better question is, should we walk of shame back?”

“I’m not walking with any shame,” Cat declares proudly.

Carly winces. “Poor choice of words.”

“I know what you meant.” She smiles. “Ready to face a room full of people who absolutely know we just had sex?”

“Well, when you put it *that* way...”

Hand in hand, they exit the car, straighten their clothes and hair, and head back into the house by way of the garage.

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It’s not like it’s a *secret* why Cat and Carly left the party for a while. Sam is mostly fine with it. But now that she’s on the other side of being at a party where people sneak off to hook up, she understands why it can be a little annoying. Like when Andre decides to wait to pack another bowl until they come back and it throws into stark relief for the *whole* party why those two are gone and how long it takes for them to come back.

But when they do come back, it’s fine, ultimately. Jade only offers a teasing comment wondering if they found what they were looking for down there, meaning the garage, but Sam can tell that her question throws them, because they *definitely* weren’t in the garage, something Sam knew. She’d heard the sound of a car door closing outside and a glance through the front window and off to the side pretty quickly told her where her girlfriends had snuck off to. The only hard part, then, was not staring, so as not to blow their cover.

After they come back up to the party, though, they’re back to being quite affectionate with her, too, so she can’t be too mad about it.

Eventually, though, it's late enough that it's time to go home. Robbie starts corralling a drunk Andre and Beck toward his car, so Sam starts encouraging her girlfriends and Freddie to make sure they have everything they need so they can leave, too. Trina heads upstairs, complaining about what a boring party it was, prompting Tori to shout after her asking why she stayed the whole time, then? But there's no answer, and Tori just rolls her eyes while Jade suppresses a smirk and pats her back comfortingly.

When they get to the car, Sam wonders if maybe she isn't the only one who realized where Cat and Carly were when Freddie says, "So...I should probably sit up front, huh?"

Cat and Carly giggle a little and exchange mortified glances. But Sam realizes that Freddie just figures they'll want to sit together. "Yeah, you probably should," she agrees.

"Right," he says under his breath, and the four of them pile into Nona's old car.

They drop Freddie off first, and neither Cat nor Carly move up to take his seat. Sam tells herself it's fine, but she's starting to wonder if she needs to say something. She starts with, "So, how roomy is that back seat?"

"Did everyone know we were out here?" Carly asks immediately.

"I don't think so. I think most people assumed you stayed in the garage. I just recognized the sound of this car's door and saw you outside."

"You *watched* us?" Cat asks, half intrigued and half horrified.

"I wish," Sam cracks. Because, now that she thinks about it, the idea of spying on her girlfriends having sex *is* pretty hot. "But no. I was trying not to clue anyone else in about where you'd gone." There's a lull, and she adds, half-joking (but not really), "Good thing Freddie doesn't have my nose, or he'd know as soon as he got into this car."

Cat squeaks indignantly, and Carly murmurs "Thank god," in agreement.

"I take it you guys had fun tonight?" Sam asks.

"Yeah!" Cat enthuses, but then her tone changes. "Why, didn't you?"

"I did, yeah," Sam answers.

"Why does it sound like you've got but voice?" Carly asks.

"But voice?" Cat asks.

"Like there's a but coming."

It seems to take Cat a second because Sam can see her wide eyes in the rearview mirror, then she says, "Oh!"

"Nothing, it's fine." Sam decides she doesn't want to ruin their night with her own angst.

“Wait,” Cat says, “You sound like something isn’t fine.”

“Come on, Sam. Be honest,” Carly all but demands.

Sam sighs. “I missed you both some of the time.” She shakes her head. “I guess maybe...god, this sounds so stupid, but I want a little more attention from you both.”

“That’s not stupid,” Carly refutes. “You two can stay over at my place,” she decides. “We could probably fit on my bed.”

Sam knows it’ll be a tight fit, but she likes this suggestion. “I’m not saying I want sex or anything. I know we’re all tired. I just want some time with you two. Maybe some...touch.”

“We’ll give you some affection,” Cat promises.

It had been a little awkward, expressing her desires in this particular way. Sam knows there will probably be a lot of other conversations like this as time goes on, there will be times when any one of them might feel left out, or might need some specific attention. A part of her feels selfish as hell for feeling this way literally one *day* into her triad polyamorous relationship, but when they get to Carly’s and all pile into the same bed and the other two happily let Sam have the middle, expressing her selfish desires feels worth it.

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The next couple of weeks seem to fly by to Carly as they push into June, with almost every day spent with friends or with either or both of her girlfriends, making art or partying or having sex. And a lot of other things, too, but mostly those three. They’ve begun scripting for *iCarly* with Freddie, for instance, but it’s been slow going simply because there’s so much else to do.

It’s getting warmer, and they’re approaching the solstice, which is really mostly significant to Carly (and other werewolves) because this month has the shortest full moon nights. But Carly has some of her best memories under summer full moons; the way the air smells, the warmth of the soil under her paws, the plethora of plants and animals that draw her senses, so full of life. Short though it may be, Carly knows how much enjoyment she and her friends can pack into even a truncated full moon night. Besides, at least they get to change. She imagines a summer solstice-adjacent full moon is most significant to Jade and Cat because they have to get up so extremely early to come get the werewolves at dawn.

She also thinks, perhaps, that the shortest full moon of the year might be the best one for Spencer to experience.

She pitches this to him as the full moon draws closer. She’s seen her brother a few times since he’s come to LA, mostly on weekends, because during the week, he’s actually working hard on his sculpture project. It’s always nice to see him motivated to create something, especially something that comes with a paycheck.

Spencer is hesitant, the way he was when Carly first brought it up, but eventually, he agrees to go for it. Friday of that week, he’s supposed to unveil his kind of “first draft” of his

sculpture for approval, and his anxiety is already high on Monday morning. So he agrees to change Wednesday night, the first night of the full moon, to quell his nerves so he has Thursday to work with a clear head to prepare for Friday.

“Or,” he rambles, sounding manic in his heightened state, “it could *totally* backfire, and I’ll just be an *absolute mess* on Thursday, but who cares? I’ve done some of my best work under pressure!”

“You’ll be fine!” Carly assures him. “I’ll make sure of it.”

In a stroke of luck, Freddie has to head back to Seattle just before the full moon, explaining in a highly embarrassed way that he has to spend Father’s Day, which is that weekend, with his mother, since he couldn’t spend Mother’s Day with her because of finals. “And,” he adds miserably, “she claims she’s basically my father, too.”

“That’s...weird, but not completely inaccurate,” Carly says.

Freddie frowns darkly. “No. It’s just weird. It’d be like saying Spencer is basically your dad, too.”

“He actually kind of is,” Carly admits. “Or, *was*, I guess. But then sometimes I had to be his dad, too, like when he’d set things on fire or get himself into trouble.”

Freddie looks like he regrets the turn the conversation has taken. “You know what? Never mind. It’s perfectly normal to go spend Father’s Day with my mom.”

“That’s the spirit!” Carly enthuses, mostly to tease him, but also because it *is* really convenient for him to be gone at a time when Spencer will be out of his apartment overnight so they won’t have to come up with a convincing explanation for his absence.

On Wednesday, Carly drives to pick up Spencer at his apartment in the evening. They hit the drive through of Inside Out Burger on their way to Shadow Creek Park, but Carly can tell by Spencer’s appetite that he’s still a bit nervous.

“Are you excited?” Carly asks him, hoping to draw out a more positive framework for his anxiety.

“No. Yes. Maybe. I don’t know,” Spencer answers in rapid succession before taking a large bite of his burger.

Yeah, that’s not promising. Carly decides maybe a total distraction is the better choice here. She’d intended to talk to Spencer about this while they’re spending time together, but she thought it might make more sense to bring it up in the morning. But she changes her mind. “Hey, so you know how I told you a couple of weeks ago about my relationship with Sam? And how she’s also seeing Cat?”

Spencer’s brow crinkles, like he finds the change in topic odd, but he nods and answers, “Yeah, of course.”

“Well, something changed with my situation, and I wanted you to hear it from me. Recently, I realized I had feelings for Cat, too, and she returned those feelings, so...all three of us are dating each other now.”

“Oh. Yeah,” Spencer replies. It’s such a lackluster response that Carly shoots him a severe side-eye. “Sorry. I kind of already knew,” he apologizes.

“Who tol—I’ll *kill* Freddie.”

Spencer shakes his head. “To be fair, he thought you’d told me already.”

“Oh.” Carly sighs out her frustration. “*Still*. Sorry, it didn’t seem like something I should just...send you a text about.”

“I get it. I guess I probably should’ve let you know that I knew. But I didn’t know if you wanted me to know to begin with.”

“Of course I did!” But it brings to mind Spencer’s tendency to be overprotective of her, like the way he used to change her coffee to decaf without telling her, or fed her wolfsbane to prevent her from changing, so she adds sarcastically, “But, if there’s anything else about me that you’re keeping from me, feel free to tell me.”

Spencer doesn’t answer for a long moment, but then he throws up his hands and cries out, “All right! All right! It wasn’t a surprise when you came out as bisexual!”

“What!?” Carly exclaims.

“I tried *really* hard to pretend it was because I wanted to validate you!” Spencer says seriously.

“But—then—wait, did Freddie tell you *that* too?!”

“No!” Spencer shakes his head quickly. “No, I—do you really think you and Sam kept everything from me when you were in high school? I knew Sam was gay from the moment I first met her and I knew you two were involved in *some* way, I just was never *quite* sure *how*! Actually, I was never quite sure if Sam was just your one female exception or something like that. So,” he adds, brightly and optimistically, “You coming out to me *was* telling me something I didn’t know for sure! It also confirmed a *lot* of things I already knew, too.”

“I can’t believe you knew!” Carly cries.

Spencer shrugs. “I know you pretty well, believe it or not. And maybe I just know what to look for, more than other people might.”

“What does *that* mean?” Carly asks, a bit venomous, because Spencer being cryptic while telling her how transparent she is feels *so* unfair.

“I just mean, not everybody even *thinks* about...queer stuff, but I understand it.”

“Oh, what, because *you’re* so gay?” Carly rolls her eyes.

“No,” Spencer answers, but there’s a hesitation in his tone that Carly doesn’t miss.

“Wait,” she says slowly. “Are you straight?”

“I guess, I mean, I think *mostly*, but like...no, not *technically*.”

“You’re bisexual too and you never *told* me?!” Carly shrieks.

“This is what happens when I don’t take wolfsbane!” Spencer shouts, throwing up his hands.

“I’m sorry, *what*!?”

“It just wasn’t something I thought I *needed* to tell you. I prefer women. Like, *strongly*. But...I wouldn’t rule a man out. But I don’t think I ever want to date a man? So it just seems like extra detail about my sex life that you don’t need.”

“You didn’t think,” Carly says slowly, “even when you *knew* I was at *least* into Sam, that sharing that you’re *also* a bisexual person would *matter* to me?!”

“It’s *different* for guys,” Spencer tries to argue, and the pain in his voice is impossible for Carly to ignore. It forces her to calm down and listen for a moment. “Especially when you’re the kind of...bi guy like me. It’s hard to get to know gay guys because I don’t want to lead them on when I know it won’t lead to anything. And most other bi men aren’t out because there’s *so* much stigma, there are women who absolutely won’t date bi men because they think we’re just going to realize we’re gay one day. So it’s easier to just...date women and be quiet about it.”

“I’m sorry,” Carly says sincerely. They’re approaching Shadow Creek Park, and on the lone stretch of open road, it’s safe to look over at Spencer for a long moment and just connect with him, to offer her sympathy. She can relate to an extent; her bisexuality and what she *thought* it meant for her, early on with her burgeoning relationship with Sam, had caused some strife and a lot of hurt for them both. She has a lot of empathy for Spencer, if his sexuality truly works the way she used to think her own did, and how fraught same-sex connections might be for him. *Especially* if women would also reject him if they ever knew about it. It might be *incredibly* annoying and gross the way straight men often found bisexual women hot, but at least they didn’t typically reject them on principle.

Spencer shrugs and smiles weakly. “Thanks.” He lets out his breath. “I’ve only ever told one other person,” he admits.

“Who?” Carly asks keenly, wondering who Spencer would deem more worthy of knowing than his very own *bisexual sister*. But then she realizes, “It was Socko, wasn’t it? It has to be Socko.”

Spencer just shrugs and doesn’t answer. Satisfied, Carly parks the car.

“Okay, so,” Carly looks at him. “I’m going to show you where Tori, Sam and I always go to change. Are you ready?”



“I guess so.” Spencer stares out at Shadow Creek Park, at the vast surrounding landscape of desert scrublands. “It’s so different from home,” he laments.

“It is, but trust me, it’s *great*,” Carly assures him.

“Okay,” Spencer sighs. “Let’s get this over with.”

Carly leads him to the grove of trees and shows him the clearing where she always changes with her friends. He looks around skeptically and nods in reluctant acquiescence. “I’m going to stay up here in my car all night,” Carly promises him. “In all the months we’ve been coming here, we’ve never seen anyone else come this way. Jade has spent the night in her car up here before. It’s going to be fine,” she assures him. But then she adds, “But, if for any reason you don’t feel safe, you can come get in my car and if we need to leave, we’ll go back to your apartment. With Freddie gone, you can hole up there until the morning, okay? But honestly, the morning is going to come *really* fast, we’ll barely even have time to worry about *anything*.”

“Okay,” Spencer repeats, sounding mildly agitated. He looks around. “I guess you’d better give me some privacy.”

“Absolutely.” She leaves the trees and waits near her car, watching the horizon as the sun slowly disappears. The moon is already bright in the clear sky, and she tips her face up to it joyfully, as if she could drink in the moonlight. It’s *very* weird to be here and to not be changing. Everything about this situation is weird, from Carly being the one to drive Spencer somewhere, to this reversal of who changes, to it being a place Carly knows better than Spencer. She’d told Freddie the other day that there have been times in her life when she’s had to be a parental figure for Spencer, and when she remembers that Spencer has literally never gone out into the wild and changed since their father took him... Carly realizes that it’s her turn to play the dad in their family, once again, while their *actual* dad is somewhere out of touch overseas somewhere.

It’s unconventional, but so is Spencer, and the older Carly gets, the more she realizes that she is, too, despite all her efforts to be so “normal” through much of her life.

It takes Spencer long enough to appear that Carly starts to worry that he secretly took wolfsbane and is hiding from her, but then she sees him, and begins to move closer. “You can come out,” she coaxes.

He does, and Carly gets her first look at her brother’s wolf form. He takes after their father and he’s a silvery-gray color, though his gangly limbs are longer. Which Carly guesses makes sense, since Spencer is a taller human, too. His dark amber eyes look wide, his tail is between his legs. Carly slows her approach, watching him cautiously.

“Hey,” she says soothingly. “It’s all good, we’re safe here.”

At the sound of her voice, his tail starts wagging. He steps closer to her on stiff legs, looking maybe like he barely remembers how to walk as a wolf. But that doesn’t make sense. It’s *instinctual*. But Carly wonders if maybe denying instincts for a long time can cloud them, and make them feel unnatural.

It seems like there might be some truth to that.

When he gets close enough, she gently strokes his head and a little more vigorously scratches behind his ears. His tail wags harder and he makes some strange whining barking sounds that make it seem like he's trying to speak, but can't, then clamps his jaw shut with frustration.

"Still getting used to being a wolf, eh?" Carly chuckles. In response, he rears up, like he's going to knock into her, and she backs away. "Come on. I have something that might help."

Carly walks back to her car, and Spencer follows curiously. She opens the trunk and pulls out one of Jade's dog toys. It sounds weird when she thinks of them that way, but it's the purple rubber bone that Jade keeps in the trunk of her car for exactly this reason. Carly had asked to borrow it, and Jade hadn't asked any questions, even as Carly was prepared to lay out her plans for helping Spencer.

She shows Spencer, and he immediately becomes *very* interested in sniffing it. Carly understands the impulse; it must be *covered* in scent from the other werewolves who have chewed on it, including Tori, from the other humans who have handled it, from whatever else is in Jade's trunk. His reaction kind of makes her want to put it close to her nose to see what *she* can discern.

Finally, he seems satisfied with sniffing it, and sits, cocking his head to the side curiously. Carly lifts it, wiggles it, and he still seems confused.

But the moment she throws it, he's off like a shot, almost as if he can't help it. Which, from Carly's experience, he probably *can't*. He looks *funny*, but the more he runs, the more his limbs seem to cooperate with him, the more he seems to remember *how* to run, the more comfortable he seems to feel as a wolf.

Carly spends a long time with him that night, helping him to embrace his wolf self, and by the time he retires to the trees and she retires to her car to get some sleep, she feels like she'd done him a great service.

In the morning, she wakes up when the sun starts to rise, almost as if her body thinks it has just changed back to human form. She's awake when Spencer, now fully human, comes striding out of the forest and slides into the passenger seat next to her.

"So," she prompts. "Did you have fun?"

"I did, actually," Spencer says. His voice is about as serious as it tends to get. He even sounds a little awed. "I'd kind of forgotten how *good* it can feel to just...*be*."

"Yeah, it feels pretty good to be," Carly snarks.

"You know what I mean."

"Oh, yeah. I really do," Carly confirms. She glances over at him. "Listen, I know this is new for you and everything, but I thought I'd offer. Do you want to come back here with my friends and I in two nights?"

Spencer looks uneasy. “Oh, man. I don’t know. I’ve really never—I don’t know if I know how to be around *other* werewolves...”

“That’s why we’re going to *show* you,” Carly insists. She glances at him encouragingly. “I know you have your sculpture to worry about, so focus on that, but I really think you should join us.”

“I’ll think about it,” he says.

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It’s the second day of the full moon, and Cat is *very* excited about it. Because tonight they aren’t doing anything with friends. Tonight is a wolfsbane and sex night.

And Cat is going to get to experience *both* of her girlfriends, with high levels of horniness, and she almost can’t *wait* to discover what it’s going to be like.

The day seems normal enough; the three of them, along with Tori and Jade, meet Andre for lunch and go to Paramesium Records. It’s a simple hangout, and feels almost like plausible deniability, maintaining the image of normalcy during the full moon. Cat can’t imagine that normal people would put together that they’re often busy evenings of the full moon, since she certainly never put that together even when she *lived* with Sam, but anyway, it’s not as though they’re doing anything they don’t *want* to do. Andre is a good choice to hang out with because he’s chill, and doesn’t ask questions when it’s clear they’re all ready to head home before it gets late.

Besides, spending the day with friends feels like it lets things...*build*. By the time they get home, Cat has been thinking about sex with her girlfriends in the back of her mind *all day*, and it’s all she can do not to start taking clothes off as soon as they get into their apartment.

But, she doesn’t need to hold out long, because unsurprisingly, her girlfriends have been having similar thoughts all day, too.

Quickly, they all end up in the bedroom, clothes are being shed. It’s frenzied and exciting, it’s hungry and primal, it’s even almost *frightening* in moments. No, Cat decides that’s not the right word. It’s *thrilling*. The pull of the moon feels like something even *she* can feel, as she gets swept up in the dual passions of her lovers.

She’s nude, on her bed, Carly’s head between her legs and Sam kissing her breathless. It’s almost overwhelming, and Cat feels like she’s reaching new levels of excitement when abruptly, she’s coming, and she’s left in the wake of her orgasm feeling...disappointment.

It’s almost the opposite of her quick orgasm in the back of the car with Carly, the one that felt like the very essence of their newness and excitement making everything feel elevated. Instead, Cat feels like everything crashed too quickly here, and left her feeling like everything built her up too high only to end too quickly.

But she smothers her disappointment. She focuses her energy, instead, on the pleasure of her girlfriends, on making sure everyone feels loved and satisfied as they all roll around together.

As she slips her fingers into Carly, though, Carly moans, “I wish I had one of my toys with me.” She has a glint in her eyes as she looks at Cat. “I’d love to see you use it on me.”

“We have some toys,” Sam suggests. She looks at Cat, her eyes almost hazy with arousal, and it doesn’t seem to occur to her that Cat might consider that toy *private*, something just for them as they work on Cat’s physical capability of enjoying more penetration.

But then, she considers, *does* it need to be private? Carly is her girlfriend, too. Just because it has only been something she and Sam engaged in before doesn’t mean she *can’t* use it with Carly.

“Get the unicorn horn,” she tells Sam in a soft voice.

Sam’s grin stretches from ear to ear as she quickly retrieves the toy, and passes it to Cat. Carly looks eager as Cat holds it, applying lube to it. “So, that’s what you two use?” she asks, a note of amusement in her voice.

“Cat picked it out,” Sam answers, almost defensively.

Carly laughs. “Well, *obviously*.”

“Do you want it or not?” Cat asks her directly. She’s not *that* stung by the light teasing, but she’s realizing that she’s maybe a little sensitive about everything surrounding this particular toy.

“I definitely want it,” Carly answers.

“Then shut up,” Cat orders affectionately, leaning over to kiss Carly to take the sting out of her words.

Carly looks utterly *thrilled* by the command, and vocalizes her pleasure as the tip of the toy begins to barely press against her. She reaches down to help Cat find the correct angle, and Cat watches as the toy slowly begins to slip inside of her. She feels her own breath catch at the sight of it, and she hears Sam over her shoulder exhale softly in response.

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The unicorn horn is certainly *different* from what Carly has at home, because of the way it tapers (Carly suspects it’s designed for a different orifice, but she’s not about to tell Cat that). But the difference in sensation is only magnified by the excitement that is the fact that it’s *Cat* using it on her. Cat, whose gentle hand pushes the toy in deep before withdrawing, Cat, whose eyes seem almost unable to look away from the toy except when they connect with Carly’s. Cat, who literally told her to *shut up* and get fucked...

The newness combined with the way Sam kisses her, and Sam’s fingers slip down her body to rub her clit while Cat picks up the pace of her thrusts, quickly brings Carly to a state of bliss as she arches off the mattress, crying out with pleasure. It *hardly* seems like enough satisfaction for her wild libido, but it’s a start.

But when Cat withdraws the toy, she seems to be in some state of agreement, because she laments, “I wish I could wear it for you, then my hands would both be free.”

“Why can’t you?” Carly asks. “That would be *hot*.”

A frown line appears on Cat’s forehead. “Because,” she seems to be fumbling over her words as she tries to explain. “*Sam* has to wear it first.”

Carly looks over at Sam, who shrugs. “That’s what we bought it for,” she explains. “For me to wear for Cat.”

“And I *know* it’s stupid,” Cat hisses in frustration. “I *know* we should be able to use it for whatever we want, because it’s *just* a toy, but something in my brain won’t let me forget that we got it for a certain *reason*, that we haven’t *done* yet, and it makes me feel like we have to do that first.”

“Hey,” Carly sits up, reaching to stroke Cat’s arm and shoulder soothingly. “I’m sorry I said something.”

“No,” Cat sighs, “Don’t be.” She offers a weak smile. “I really *loved* using it on you.”

“Me, too,” Carly grins. She considers their situation, considers the box of toys under her bed. Maybe it would be good to just start fresh. “Maybe we could all go to the Pleasure Chest sometime, and pick out something new for us to use all together.”

“Sam,” Cat says abruptly, in another mercurial mood shift, “put this on.”

“What?” Sam asks, clearly surprised, maybe because she hasn’t had an orgasm yet.

“I want to try it again,” Cat says.

“Are you sure?” Sam asks.

“Yes,” Cat replies assuredly.

Sam looks at Carly with an expression that communicates that she’s not one to argue with Cat when she’s like this. Which, who *would*? If what she thinks is about to happen is about to happen, Carly can’t wait.

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Sam takes the toy into the bathroom with her along with the harness, because strapping on a unicorn horn in front of both her lovers sounds like a way to get teased for all eternity. Not that she’s not going to get teased by the two of them for *something* forever, anyway. It’s a brand of affection Sam is well-acquainted with.

When she comes out of the bathroom, with the toy in place, she can see Carly fight a smile. “Oh, wow,” she murmurs insincerely.

“Oh, shut up,” Sam grumbles.

“I think she looks hot,” Cat comments.

“Good, since...that’s for you,” Carly tells her, still highly amused.

Sam climbs back onto the bed, facing Cat. “Okay,” she murmurs. “You ready?”

“Ready,” Cat says bravely, leaning back to put her legs in front of her.

“Um,” Carly says cautiously, but then seems to think better of it.

“What?” Sam asks her.

“You should probably let Cat be on top. So she has more control.”

Sam doesn’t know why they didn’t default to that. She remembers they tried it early on as well, but the major fantasy, for Cat and for her, has always been with Sam on top, essentially, missionary position sex. But Carly makes a good point. “Yeah, let’s do that,” Sam agrees, and Cat nods.

Sam stretches out onto her back, and Cat straddles her hips, the toy, slick with lube, in front of her. From Sam’s angle, it looks *absurd* that it should fit inside of Cat, but Cat seems determined, and honestly, Sam just wants her to be happy and enjoy their sex life.

Carly settles behind Cat and presses a kiss against her shoulder. “Take your time,” she advises, as Cat lifts, positions herself over the toy, and begins to slowly sink down toward Sam’s lap.

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She feels Sam’s gentle hands on her waist and Carly’s on her shoulders as she begins to ease the toy inside herself. The first part is easy; it always has been, those first couple of inches that Sam has carefully penetrated her with as they figured out her limit. But Cat knows her body is capable of more. She’s a dancer, who pushes her body into new positions and learns new ways to coordinate movement; she’s a singer, whose lung capacity and range has broadened and extended with practice; she’s an actress, whose embodiment of characters unlike herself has brought forth new physicalities and emotions; she’s a performer, just in general, which means she trusts her body to learn and improve.

And she’s a sexual being, one who is still in the process of shedding sexual shame. Which means, to Cat, that learning more about herself and her capacity for pleasure is only just the beginning.

With the comforting presence of both of her partners, Cat continues to allow the toy to slip into herself until she reaches the point where the toy’s girth makes her stop, as warning signals of impending pain shoot up her body. But as she pauses and assesses, there’s no *actual* pain, just her body bracing for it, *fearing* it.

Carly kisses her shoulder. Sam gazes up at her with concerned blue eyes, full of affection. Cat takes in a deep breath and releases it, feeling the way her body relaxes, feeling the way her nervous system no longer signals for caution in quite the same way. She focuses between her

legs, on the sensation of *opening*, she remembers how it felt to be filled with the fingers of her lovers, how *nothing* hurt, even with the thrusting and curling of fingers. If she could accommodate *that*, she should be able to take *this*.

Cat sinks down a little further, breath catching as more of the toy slips inside her, until the *actual* sensation of pain forces her to stop. That stinging, stretching sensation she assumes is her hymen, hilariously still with some vestige of intactness, despite the myriad of ways Cat has shed her virginity, embraced sexuality, this one piece remains, a scrap of flesh, that maybe once was there to protect her, but is now an impediment to her exploration of pleasure.

She must've made some sort of sound, because she feels Sam's hands tighten on her hips, and she whispers, "Babe."

"If it hurts, you should stop," Carly advises gently.

But Cat doesn't *want* to stop, because the more she stays here and breathes, the less it hurts, and she wants *so badly* to *feel* the depth of penetration Sam wants to give her. She reaches to grab one of Sam's hands at her waist, and one of Carly's hands at her shoulder, and lets herself sink down just a little more.

The stinging sensation becomes almost unbearable for a brief moment, forcing a cry from her lips, but then, abruptly, Cat sinks even further down, and the sharp sensation suddenly fades into a dull ache, making Cat feel raw and vulnerable but *victorious* and *full*.

"I did it," she gasps out.

"Are you okay?" Carly asks, sounding alarmed.

"I did it," Cat repeats. "I'm *great*. Sam's *inside* of me. Look!"

Carly cranes her neck to try to see over Cat's shoulder, but it doesn't quite work, so Cat watches as her fingers start at the strap-on harness and probe their way to the base of the toy, then Cat's flesh, which now encompasses *so much* of the toy. "*Oh*," Carly utters.

"Fuck," Sam whispers, her gaze focused on the junction of her toy and Cat's body.

Cat lifts her hips and slowly sinks back down. There's an echo of the dull ache inside of her, but it's not sharp or painful, it feels more like a reminder of what Cat has just accomplished as she continues to move.

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Carly is elated by Cat's success, by the way she can just *feel* her pleasure and joy as she begins to move in earnest on Sam's lap. She wraps an arm around Cat's body to grasp her breast and moves with her, and since her other hand is *kind of* already right there, she begins to swirl her fingers gently over Cat's clit, not trying to escalate anything too quickly, just trying to let Cat set the pace and enjoy this experience for as long as she wants. Carly's just here to offer encouragement.

Though with the way Sam begins to lift her hips to meet Cat's movements, maybe they're on different pages.

"Sam," Carly chides gently as she presses a line of kisses onto Cat's shoulder.

"What?" Sam asks, sounding a little dazed. She's clearly in the moment, focused on Cat and their connection.

"Let her set the pace," Carly reminds her.

"No, no," Cat says breathlessly, "This is good, Sam is good. I want *more*."

"More how?" Sam asks breathlessly.

"*More*," Cat begs, clearly unable to articulate further.

Carly meets Sam's eyes, and in a flash, it seems to come to them both what should happen.

"Lift off," Sam instructs Cat, and Carly can see her urging her up with her hands.

Cat seems onboard with what's happening, though, and rises from Sam's lap. She leans back toward Carly, perhaps only trying to uncurl her legs, but Carly wraps her arms around Cat and brings her close to her chest while she leans back against some pillows at the foot of the bed. Cat squeaks a little in surprise, and then gasps when Carly grabs her ass and lifts her.

Carly is pretty strong—one of the perks of being a werewolf—and with most of Cat's body weight resting against her, lifting Cat, who is already small, is quite easy. Sam is kneeling in front of them, and sees the way Carly holds Cat for her, ready to accept penetration.

Sam grins and nods at Carly, then moves toward them. Cat's legs reach to wrap around her, urging her closer.

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Sam leans over Cat and Carly, bracing herself against the wall behind them, and then guides the toy back inside Cat. She moves gently, hoping that the change in position doesn't bring new discomfort for Cat, but Cat whimpers in pleasure, and Sam pushes in deeper, marveling at the ease with which she moves inside of Cat. Cat's legs hook around her hips, and Sam begins to move a little faster, eventually lifting one knee to give herself more leverage as she thrusts with her hips.

"*More*," Cat begs.

It seems *unreal* that she should want so much, so quickly, but Sam isn't going to deny her what she begs for. She thrusts faster, harder, panting with exertion, and sees Carly's hands, which no longer have to hold Cat up with Sam positioned like she is, on Cat's breasts, the way she rolls her nipples, and hears the way Cat moans, a sharp sound like the sensation verges on painful, but she's *smiling*, so fully and genuinely, that it just spurs Sam and Carly further.



Sam locks eyes with Carly, and it's like they understand each other once again, and awakens something within them both.

Sam leans over to kiss Cat, messy and hard, and bites her lip as her hips keep thrusting, prompting Cat to moan into her mouth. She lifts her head, to see Carly's nails running down Cat's torso, Carly's teeth sinking into the meat of her shoulder, and Sam lowers her head to let her own mouth suck hard against Cat's neck, hearing the way the sensations produce a plethora of sounds, hearing the sound of their skin slapping together, feeling the potent *energy* between the three of them, as Carly holds Cat so she can get *pounded* by Sam.

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Cat hangs in balance, barely coherent, sandwiched between the two bodies of her lovers, hot skin sticking, feeling Carly's support and Sam's enthusiasm, feeling the sore ache inside of her abate, only to be replaced by the pleasure of being filled, of being made love to in a way so intense that thoughts seem to get shaken out of her, escaping her through the moans she lets out, and it's pleasure *all over*, the scratches on her chest, the teeth at her throat, being held fast between two very powerful women who want nothing more than to give her what she needs. One of Carly's hands slides down to her clit, but unlike earlier, the motion of her fingers is urgent now, like she knows exactly what Cat needs.

It's overwhelming, in the *best* way this time, and the orgasm that overtakes her is explosive, and seems like it never ends, with the way each thrust of Sam's, each swirl of Carly's fingers on her clit, the sensation of their presence, of their warmth, the way even the shuddering of her orgasm seems to bring them all closer together, until Sam sinks in deep and stays there this time, pushing another wave of orgasm out of her, and every part of Cat feels like it sings with euphoria.

When she begins to come down, it becomes clear why Sam had thrust that way, because she slides off of Carly as soon as Sam withdraws. Her skin feels too hot suddenly, and she's left aware of the remnants of pleasure all over her skin—the slivers of pain of the scratches on her chest, the tender bite marks on her shoulders, the throbbing ache between her legs.

Every bit of it feels *so good* it makes her giggle.

Cat allows herself to be held between her girlfriends as she floats in the aftereffects of her orgasm, until the press of so much skin is too much and she rolls away, taking some space and reclining on the bed next to both of them.

She watches, hazily, as Carly compliments Sam. "You're pretty good with that thing."

"You want me to show you *how* good?" Sam asks.

Carly's eyes flash with delight, and she looks to Cat, and Cat realizes Sam is already looking at her, seeking permission.

"Do it," Cat instructs. "Let me watch."

She doesn't think she could have another orgasm even if she wanted to, with the way the heaviness in her whole body coaxes her to rest, but she watches keenly as Carly turns over onto her hands and knees.

"Wait." Cat has an idea. She'd wanted distance, and because she'd assumed Carly and Sam would be doing it face to face, she didn't think there was room for her, but now she wants to be more involved, and wants to be underneath Carly while she gets pounded.

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Carly rolls to the side to let Cat settle on her back beneath her, and smiles down at her. "I thought you were out of commission," she comments.

"Not for this." Cat smiles up at her. "I want to see your face when Sam is inside you."

Carly shivers slightly at the implication, and feels Sam's hands on her hips, encouraging her to adjust her stance. Carly settles further down, closer to Cat, and kisses her, but then lifts her head and closes her eyes as she feels the tip of the toy Sam wears begin to press inside of her.

Sam is clearly already amped from what just happened with Cat, though, because she isn't slow and gentle, she pushes in in a deep, steady thrust, knocking Carly's breath out in a groan. It's not painful; she had this toy inside of her not long ago, after all, but the *shock* of it, of Sam just *taking* her like this, instantly spikes her libido.

She feels Cat's hand on her face, gentle, a stark contrast to Sam's hands on her hips, gripping her firmly, and Carly opens her eyes to look down at her. Cat smiles. "How does it feel?" she asks in a quiet voice.

"Intense," Carly admits. Almost in response, she feels Sam start to move faster.

"You look so beautiful," Cat tells her.

The tenderness of those words seem to flow over her, rippling warmth over her skin, feeling incongruous with the thrusting between her legs. She feels Sam lean over her back, kissing her shoulders, and then she *bites* the taut flesh of Carly's back, making her cry out, and as she straightens back up, she runs her nails down Carly's back before her hands settle on her waist again, grabbing and almost tugging Carly back against her with each thrust.

Carly feels like she can hardly hold herself up anymore, and starts to lower her head and her chest against Cat's body. Cat kisses her cheek, her temple, and Carly feels her hand reaching between their bodies, and Cat's fingers, almost dreamily, caressing her clit, but somehow, it works, the frenetic rhythm of Sam's toy inside her, the gentle sensation of Cat's affection, and Carly pushes back against Sam with her own vigorous return thrusts until her orgasm erupts out of her in a clamor of sound and—not fury, but *frenzy*, *ferocity*, the passion of bodies and motion and love and satiation, like a feast for Carly's heart, like symmetry and harmony, as her two lovers slowly bring her back down to earth.

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Sam's abs are *tired*. She suspects it's only the moon and the wolfsbane that is keeping her going. And also the fact that she's *so close*. She has been for a while, now, she just hasn't *quite* had enough sensation to get off herself.

She pulls out of Carly and sits back, groaning a little as she finally has a chance to catch her breath. Carly kisses Cat, lying limp against her.

Cat is the first to speak, when Carly's forehead rests against her shoulder. "Sam, you're *incredible*," she breathes.

Carly groans her affirmation, and Sam grins, "Thanks."

"We're not done," Carly manages breathlessly, and rolls off of Cat, turning feral eyes to Sam.

"We—wait," Cat turns to Sam. "Did you not...finish?" Cat asks, almost whispering the last word.

"No," Sam groans, pulling loose the straps of her harness to take it off. "And I'm *so close*, I —"

Before Carly can even move toward her—because Sam can tell she wants to—Cat is there, helping to tug the strap-on away, and her mouth immediately gets to work between Sam's legs.

"*Fuck*," Sam groans. She's mostly seated, pressed back against the headboard, and Carly crawls over to her to kiss her, but briefly, as her mouth starts to trace a path down her neck to her breasts. Sam feels awash in sensation, mouths working over her flesh, and then Carly *bites* her, right on the breast.

It triggers her orgasm, one built of all the work she did, chasing the friction of her toy with each thrust inside her partners, the feeling of their bodies so close, their skin so warm, the feeling of *accomplishment* after hard work, something Sam rarely finds joy in, but when it comes to sex, all she wants is success and ambition and *results*.

And finally, the payoff for all of Sam's hard work is a hard orgasm, one that feels like it goes on for a long time, as memories and images play through her head, and love fills her heart, and it feels like being washed back up onshore when she recovers her senses, and finds herself being held and kissed by Cat and Carly, and realizes she's laughing with the pure joy of living.

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They lie together in Cat's bed, which is now a mess, pillows everywhere, comforter mused, sheets askew. She'll have to remake it entirely. Though, also, now that she thinks about it, she should probably change the sheets and everything after what just happened here.

She rests her head on Sam's shoulder and smiles as she thinks about all the sex they just had. She's had *a lot* of sex lately; it's easy enough for the three of them to fall into bed together whenever they're alone, she's had time alone with Carly, both at Carly's apartment and even

here, when Sam has gone out on her own for a while to give them privacy. She knows Sam and Carly have had their own alone time, and so have she and Sam; the addition of Carly to their relationship, ironically, seems to make their own sexual connection that much stronger. For her part, Cat knows that it has to do with feeling less jealousy and resentment now that she no longer feels left out all the time, and Sam has expressed that watching Carly with Cat offers her a very prominent reminder of just how desirable and attractive and *sexy* Cat is.

This experience, though, feels like one she'll remember for a long time.

She's been unlearning a lot of what she was taught about sex. She's been unlearning a lot of it for years at this point. Even so, the idea of a hymen having anything to do with virginity is something she unlearned very early on and certainly, in her own experience, its presence or absence has had *very* little to do with her own sexual history and loss of virginity.

Funny, then, that this experience, when she finally actually "broke" her hymen, for lack of a better term, is something she's going to remember as significant. Not just because it's the first time Sam used a strap-on on her (and, judging from the pillow talk, the first time she used one with Carly, too), but because the actual experience of finally moving past a *physical* barrier in her own body that prevented her from enjoying the kind of sex she wants to have feels...well, like a feat. So many of her barriers surrounding sex have been mental, and some have been quite taxing to work through, that the resolution of *this* barrier, which ultimately came down to a bit of pushing through some pain, feels like a *relief*.

There's a bit of a dull ache between her legs even still, but there was no blood, and the ache feels...kind of *good*. Like sore muscles after a dance class or an energetic role onstage. Like evidence of accomplishment.

"I'm so glad you decided to let Carly back into your life all those months ago," Cat sighs against Sam's shoulder.

Sam chuckles. "Me, too. Though, really, Tori was making it *pretty* hard not to."

"So you're saying this is all Tori's fault?" Carly jokes dryly.

"We should thank her," Cat suggests, half in jest.

"She'll *love* that," Sam snarks.

"I'll bake her a cake," Carly decides.

"You?" Sam says skeptically.

"I don't know why you underestimate me," Carly replies, insulted. "I made like forty pies once."

"Correction: *we* made like forty pies. With Freddie. Who is actually pretty good at baking, come to think of it."

"Well, I know I can handle making a cake. I wonder if I can get Nona to show me a recipe?" Carly muses.

“Nona makes *great* cakes!” Cat enthuses.

Sam groans. “I don’t know why you like hanging out with her.”

“Because she’s a sweet old lady? I don’t know why *you* don’t like hanging out with her, she makes great food.”

“She *does*,” Sam admits, sounding conflicted. “I don’t know, maybe I can give her another chance. For the food.”

Cat catches Carly’s eye and they both roll their eyes, amused. It *would* be nice if Sam could stop being so weird about her grandmother, but ultimately, Cat is fine if spending time with Nona is just something she and Carly do together. It’s *great* spending time all together, with the two people she loves most, but she likes that they have special things they do in pairs. Like Sam and Carly with *iCarly*, and with being werewolves together. Like she and Carly with karaoke and spending time with Nona. Or how she and Sam work together, go to school together, and have a routine of shows they like to watch and dinners they like to eat and friends, like Dice and Goomer, who are really just *theirs*.

Right now, when it comes to her life, Cat really can’t ask for much more.

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It’s Friday, the final night of the full moon, and Shadow Creek Park night. It’s always so much easier in the summer, when no one has to worry about school and homework, and the most any of them have to do is come up with excuses why they can’t hang out with other friends (though, telling people she wants some alone time with Jade has always worked for Tori, probably because no one wants to make Jade angry).

Carly had asked whether she might bring her brother along; apparently, he’d changed for the first time in a *long* time on the first night of the full moon, and she thought it might be nice for him to have some time with other werewolves. Tori is certainly open to it. It might be a little weird, since she doesn’t know Carly’s brother all that well, but there’s nothing like a werewolf’s nose to help you get to know someone *real* quick.

The only snag in the plan is that they don’t all drive out the Shadow Creek Park together, which is a little disappointing since it’s become such a big part of the ritual. But they need an extra car to be able to fit Spencer, so instead, it just ends up feeling a little more like old times; Sam and Cat come to Tori’s house to eat some dinner beforehand, while Carly goes alone to pick up Spencer, so she can, as Cat says, reassure him on the drive up that he won’t be *too* weird around the other werewolves.

“This is making me think, though, that I should get a driver’s license,” Cat remarks as they get ready to drive to the park.

“It’s pretty useful,” Jade comments neutrally.

“We’ve managed without you having one so far,” Sam tells her.

“I know, but if I could drive, we wouldn’t have to leave Carly’s car up at Shadow Creek Park tonight. I know that the chances that anything will happen to it are basically nothing, but it still would probably be better. Besides, if I could drive, then I could go see Carly myself without one of you having to give me a ride to her apartment!”

“Those seem like good reasons to me,” Tori tells her. “You know it took me some time to get mine, but I’ve never regretted it.”

“Yeah, you have a point,” Sam says, though Tori thinks she sounds a little bit wistful about it. Probably because she’s so used to the idea of being the one in the relationship who drives.

As they travel down the desolate road toward Shadow Creek Park, there’s an eerie moment in which Tori realizes they’re being followed. It’s so disconcerting for it to happen on a road in which they’re always alone, that it takes her a second to realize that it’s Carly’s VW Bug behind them.

They pull up at the same time and begin piling out of their cars. “Carly!” Cat shouts happily, greeting her with a big hug and a brief kiss.

“Hey!” Carly laughs, accepting her affection and then offering Sam a quick peck, too.

So...Tori guesses Carly’s brother must know about her relationships.

Which, Spencer is standing awkwardly nearby, hands in his pockets, looking too tall to belong here. Tori waves at him and offers a friendly, “Hey.”

“Oh, right, this is my brother, Spencer,” Carly says. “This is Tori and Jade.”

“Nice to meet you,” he replies, sounding as awkward as he looks.

“Likewise,” is all Jade offers in response.

“What brings you to LA?” Tori asks. She’s heard a bit from Carly, but sometimes it’s nice to offer someone a chance to talk when they’re feeling out of place.

“I’m here working on a sculpture project at, um, Cat’s old high school.”

“Wait. Hollywood Arts?” Tori asks excitedly, to which Spencer nods. “Jade and I went there, too! That’s awesome!”

“Oh, yeah, didn’t you have some kind of, like, big meeting about your sculpture today?” Sam asks him curiously. “How’d that go?”

“Oh, that went *fantastic*,” Spencer enthuses. “I pitched my concept piece, and the guy in charge only had a few notes for me, and as soon as all the teachers finish out the last bit of work for the school year, I get to start actually sculpting in the school!” He looks pleased and proud. “The guy who commissioned the piece and me, we are like, *simpatico*.” He draws the word out for emphasis.

“Well, that’s great!” Tori says happily.

“Are you ready to celebrate with some wolf time?” Carly asks him.

“You know what? I really am!” he says eagerly.

The first snag comes when they realize that all four of them really *can't* change in the clearing, in part because there really isn't room, and because Spencer balks at the idea of being naked around Carly and Sam, and, well, none of the three women really want him naked around them, anyway. They quickly find another spot for Spencer to change, around behind the grove of trees so he'll be out of sight of Cat and Jade, too. The desert stretches until the horizon becomes hills and mountains, with no one in sight, but Spencer still isn't thrilled about being naked “out in the open.”

“No one will see you,” Carly assures him.

“Then maybe *you'd* like to change out here?” he suggests.

The girls exchange glances, and Sam shrugs.

Which is how the three of them end up standing outside the grove of trees, naked, waiting for the change.

“You know, he has a point.” Carly shivers, and it can't be from the cold, because there is still lingering summery warmth in the air. “It kinda feels like anyone could be watching us.”

“From where? Space?” Sam asks, though then she looks up, as if attempting to search the sky for spy drones.

“I don't know!” Carly says defensively. “I guess it is just weird to be out in the open like this.”

Tori knows the feeling. She feels...*exposed* out here. “Let's just hope this is only for one night.”

“Spencer will be back in Seattle by the next full moon,” Carly confirms.

But as the sun fully sets and change overtakes them, there's little to worry about but *becoming*.

Once they're three wolves, yipping with joy, Carly leads them into the clearing to find Spencer.

Tori stops when she sees him, because he's larger than they are, and his body language is communicating his need for distance: hunched shoulders, low tail, hackles up. She can *smell* his fear. She whimpers, not understanding. What is he afraid of? Is she missing some danger that he can sense?

Carly approaches him carefully, gently, and his tail begins to wag slightly, until they embrace in the way that wolves can, noses pressed against the thick fur of the other's neck, inhaling the scent of one another. Spencer whines, a strangely human sound, then barks.

Sam approaches him next, looking confident and brave, and Spencer greets her in much the same way. He seems to be getting excited now, rearing up onto hind legs, making strange joyful howling barks.

Tori approaches last. Spencer seems hesitant as she draws nearer, but they sniff each other's noses, sniff each other's feet. They never embrace quite the way he embraces the other two, but that's fine with Tori. She can smell that he's anxious, that he feels out of place, but also that he's *so excited* to have a chance to be with other wolves. She can smell how *isolated* he's been, how *new* this is for him. He's like a pup in the body of a long-legged fully-grown silver-coated werewolf.

And when Carly and Sam start to chase him out of the woods, Tori can see how awkward he is. How he doesn't seem to know how to respond to their cues, their invitations to chase, to wrestle, to play. He stiffens up, he lunges in the wrong way, he barrels into them by accident. It's a mess.

But he's learning. Tori senses he's rarely had time to learn how to act with other werewolves.

She's glad they can be there for him. She's glad they can make him feel safe.

Maybe Shadow Creek Park isn't quite big enough for another werewolf, but Tori likes the idea that they could welcome more, that maybe their pack could grow.

But, for now, she's also happy with the people she's close to right now, and the bonds they all share, and the rest of the summer they have to look forward to.

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Jade stands with Cat and watches as the four werewolves come bounding out through the park. Spencer is easy to identify, being larger than the other three and also by his silvery-gray coat. It's also easy to see how ungainly he is, how uncertain he seems about the other wolves.

"Carly says he does well chasing the toys," Cat comments, seeming to notice Spencer's wolfish awkwardness, too.

"Well, then," Jade drawls, "Let's get the toys."

They retrieve the dog toys, and very quickly four pairs of lupine eyes focus on them, four tails start wagging. Cat glances at Jade. "There's four of them and only two toys," she notes.

Jade grins. "Then they'll have to fight for them."

It's kind of fun to watch the wolves all chase and playfully fight each other for a chance to retrieve a rubber bone or a tennis ball. It's also kind of cool to watch Spencer begin to excel at chasing and retrieving, over the other wolves (though Carly continually gives him a run for his money). His long legs give him a clear advantage, and the longer they play, the more assured he seems on his gangly wolf's legs.

Eventually, it reaches the point where the wolves seem to want to just go wander and smell things for a while, which is fine. She and Cat will have plenty of the evening to spend time



together and hang out. It feels like it's been forever since they hung out alone, though of course, it's only been about a month. It's just that so much has already happened this month, the beginning of their summer vacation, that it feels like far longer.

Also, Jade is planning to start rehearsing with Cat for her role in the movie she's working on this summer. She just hasn't told Cat that yet.

They climb into Jade's car after saying goodbye to the werewolves (Spencer even lets them pet him a little, and seems delighted by their attention, but then some smell or something catches his attention and he runs off). The addition of Spencer to the evening has been a bit strange, if only because it changes the routine, but Jade can see how important to Carly it is to include her brother. She wonders if, when her brother gets old enough to seem like a real human person and not like a miniature pain in the ass, if she'll care so much about him, too.

"So was it weird?" she asks Cat, "When Spencer found out about you three?"

Cat tilts her head ambivalently. "Carly was annoyed because Freddie told him. But Freddie only said something because he thought Spencer already knew. So it wasn't a big deal."

"Ah." She digests that. She never really told her brother about her relationship, but then, she hadn't hidden it from him, either. They'd just never spoken about her sexuality or about her girlfriend directly. It was easier that way.

"Maybe someday, I'll be able to tell my brother," Cat says, a touch melancholy.

Jade had just been wondering about that when Cat brought it up. "How's he doing?" she asks.

Cat shrugs. "He finished his inpatient program. My parents say he's stable. They're staying up there because he has a good support system there and they don't want to abandon or uproot him."

"Makes sense."

"Yeah," Cat says simply. "I miss them, but...my life is *so* full and rich right now. I really can't complain."

"I'll bet," Jade drawls. She glances at Cat, who sits in the passenger seat smiling serenely. "So, what's it like getting both girls?" she asks.

Cat's grin broadens. "It's wonderful," she tells Jade. "It's like...Sam and I know each other *so well*, and we have these patterns and routines. And Carly is someone *new*. She helps me explore and grow and helps Sam and I see things in a new way."

"That makes sense," Jade replies. She considers what Cat has said. "I can't figure out *what* you could be talking about other than sex, but I'm happy for you."

"It's more than just sex!" Cat exclaims, though she looks a little smug, and she sounds it, too, as she adds, "Though, you're not wrong, either. But we all bring out different sides of each other. Even *outside* the bedroom. And it helps me feel...balanced, I guess."

“I can see that.” She tries to catch Cat’s eye for a moment before turning her attention back to the empty stretch of road. “I think this might be the happiest I’ve ever seen you.”

“I’m *very* happy,” Cat agrees. Then she grins at Jade. “I feel like how you looked when you started dating Tori.”

Jade scoffs. “I wasn’t any different.”

Cat laughs. “You wrote a gay play because you were falling in love with her.”

“I wrote a—” Jade sighs. “I wrote a gay play because I felt like it at the time. That’s all.”

“Sure.” Cat winks.

But Jade knows she can’t really fight it. She’s *happy* with Tori, and especially happy that it’s summer, and they have time to spend together, all while pursuing art, just for the fun of making things. Jade already feels certain it’s going to be a great summer. The idea of so much time with Tori, and all their friends, brings with it a strangely potent feeling of optimism.

Jade would still *never* describe herself as an optimistic person, but she’s learned to embrace that sometimes life can be joyful. Sometimes, optimism looks good on her. Tori has taught her that much, and Tori still brings it out of her, and sometimes, so do her friends, especially her closest ones, the ones she’ll drive out at dusk and wake up before dawn for.

But even if Cat is right, she’s not about to give in so easily, so she turns to threats. “Wait until you hear about what I’m working on *now*,” Jade growls sinisterly.

Cat’s expression falters slightly, but then she shakes her head. “You know I’ll always support your ideas,” she says.

“And I always have your back, too,” Jade promises. After a moment, she adds. “If Sam or Carly ever hurt you...”

“Don’t worry,” Cat tells her. “I can take care of myself.”

And for the first time, Jade believes her.

## Chapter End Notes

Part 4 coming soon

## End Notes

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